

THE THINGS WE ARE

By the same Author

NOVEL

Still Life

ESSAYS AND CRITICISM

Fyodor Dostoevsky

The Evolution of an Intellectual

Aspects of Literature

The Problem of Style

POETRY

Cinnamon and Angelica

Poems (1916-1920)

THE THINGS WE ARE

A Novel

BY

JOHN MIDDLETON MURRY

"Simply the thing I am
Shall make me live."

—PAROLLES

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TO
KATHERINE MANSFIELD

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CHAPTER I

MR. BOSTON

"Thou hast nor youth nor age,
But as it were an after-dinner sleep,
Dreaming on both."

MR. BOSTON let the typewritten notes of a speech on "Liberalism and Unemployment" fall to the floor. "My God!" he said, and smiled wryly. It was not his own speech, although he had composed it. Precisely in the middle of one-half of a round gate-legged table stood a portable typewriter, unconscious of the monstrous thing to which it had given birth. Over the other half, its edge making an exact diameter, was spread a white tablecloth, bearing the remains of an unexciting lunch. The glass water-jug was most conspicuous; it dominated the pale yet massive cottage loaf, the banana-skins and the pot of marmalade. It was Sunday.

Mr. Boston was thirty years old, though his looks would have allowed him anything

between twenty-five and thirty-five. A stranger would have chosen the extremes rather than the mean, the greater rather than the lesser age. For he looked tired. He always looked tired. He was not too old to take some pleasure in cultivating that appearance, and occasionally he did so ; but there was really no need. His charwoman, the only person who was known to have seen him asleep, thought he had a " face like a mask " even then.

He stared blankly at the disordered notes where they had fluttered to the ground, but he made no effort to pick them up. Instead, he went across the room to a tall bureau in hire-system Sheraton, and gently pulled open a drawer. It contained two brown cardboard boxes on either side of a polished mahogany work-box, with a lozenge of mother-of-pearl in the lid. They fitted into the drawer space so perfectly that one would have thought they had been collected for the purpose. The cardboard boxes had been.

He lifted out the first cardboard box. It was full of faded grey gloves, tied with mauve ribbon. There was a bundle of little handkerchiefs edged with lace. Dividing them was

a sachet of yellowed pink paper. He held the box to his nose with the same wry smile. He put the open box on to the desk above, and bent down for the other. It held a small square needle-case in tartan, a small oval mirror in mother-of-pearl, a pair of garnet ear-rings and a plain gold bracelet in a nest of cotton-wool, and a pair of brocade shoes. The mahogany box was quite empty. Nevertheless, he placed it wide-open between the others on the desk. The dark-red paper lining had turned to patchy pink, making it forlorn as an empty room in a neglected, mildewed house.

He drew a chair up to the desk and leaned upon it with one elbow, resting his cheek in his left hand. With his right hand he slowly moved a little pink drawer backwards and forwards in the empty work-box. He stared at the movement for a while. Then he took the mirror from its box, breathed on it and watched the mist clear away. He held it close to his eyes and gazed into their reflection. They were brown, and clouded as though they had been frozen; long dark lashes fringed the lids. When he had looked into them till he was almost dizzy, he snatched the mirror to his lips and kissed it passionately.

He put the boxes swiftly back into their drawer, gathered up his notes and sat down in his wooden arm-chair again. "The Liberal party cannot be held responsible for the present unemployment which is the direct result of the abnormal war-conditions." He put the papers on his knee and leaned his head back to think over the proposition; he could not think about it at all. He made a last effort to hold the typewritten sentence before his mind's eye, putting it there laboriously, word by word. As each new word came into position an old one faded away. Instead there came a picture which changed little by little in details, but the centre was always the same.

Now sunlight streamed into the little room; now it was grey, and he seemed to hear the rain; now it was dusk, and he himself would enter with a pink-shaded lamp in his hand. He would be bending down to light the fire, moving the steel shutter so timidly that the least scraping jarred him through and through. He would be looking over the books in the shelves by the door, one by one, chilled by the cold glance of even the most familiar, by the insensibility of the books they had loved. Dark-blue *David Copperfield* simply stared

MR. BOSTON

at him. Or he would be taking a tray from Josephine at the door, a tray with a purple rose in a little brown pot set in the corner of it; and he could not look Josephine in the face. Or he would be parting the curtains in the morning nervously, with the half-hope that their opening would reveal some mysterious, overwhelming good fortune born in the night and waiting patiently to enter with the day.

But the unchanging centre of this picture was a bed, heaped high with pillows, the white sheet so neatly folded that it seemed impossible that the girlish head and hands resting upon them should belong to a living woman. The placing of the red on the cheeks, high on the cheek-bones, and the smudge of the red itself suggested the brush of a clumsy workman marring an exquisite doll, marring the work of the artist who made her eyebrows with two single strokes of a sable pen, and her lips, which she held parted a little save when she smiled at him. Whenever she looked at him it was to smile with her lips and eyes, while her head remained as in a vice unmoved; but for the most part she looked fixedly towards the top of the window where, in the day, she could see only

the leaves of the garden vine, and in the night nothing at all.

This was Mr. Boston's mother. From him her fragile and doll-like beauty could not have been deduced ; from her one could have told that he was her son. Their eyes, brown and clouded, were the same ; so were their long lashes. But that which he most plainly held from her was a gift which she was never again to display—a curious suspense of gesture, as though when she stretched out her hand for a thing she half expected it might come to meet her. If she were entering a room her hand seemed to hover, to hesitate over the door-handle, so that you could not have told whether she were ever so little afraid of coming from the wings on to the stage, or she fancied that the door also might open of itself before her. When she walked it was as though there were an invisible little stream before her and she were choosing delicately how to go dryshod ; or perhaps again waiting for that too to divide its waters before her. But now her hand no longer hovered ; it swung feebly towards the things he put on the bedside table, rested wearily there, and fell limply on to the sheet again. This was what struck him most in the long fortnight he spent

in the drawing-room (made a bedroom in order that she might see the garden). Even the vermilion brush-marks on her cheeks were not wholly incredible—her beauty had often seemed to him unreal—but the change in her gesture was. By so much she was no longer his, she had slipped from his hands; and from the first an instinct had whispered that if she slipped from his hands, she would be broken.

They said very little. Now in the picture it seemed to him that they said scarcely anything at all. Her pain was too great perhaps; perhaps there was nothing to say. He put the mother-of-pearl mirror in her hands; he could not bear to see her reach out for things. He had bought it for her when he first went to Paris to commence at the Sorbonne, two years before. Clasp ing it in her hands on the sheet, she moved her eyes towards him. "What a lovely present!" she whispered.

"Oh, darling!" He wanted to say more, but could not; there was nothing to say.

She raised the mirror slowly to her face, and smiled into it. "Havy," she whispered. He kneeled down beside the bed. "I want to look pretty when I die. Do I?"

He wanted to call out, in an astonished,

incredulous voice, "Why, you're not going to die, darling!" but a weight lay on his tongue. "You're lovely, lovely," he said.

She closed her eyes and lips, as though she would lock the truth into her body. He went outside and crept up and down the passage, muttering "Devil . . . devil . . . , devil. . . ."

Mrs. Boston died while he was in the passage. Though she looked just the same when he opened the door—her eyes and lips sealed and the mirror held loosely in her fingers—he knew she was dead. A wasp circled stupidly round her sticky medicine-glass.

It was not surprising that this picture should come ever and again into Mr. Boston's mind. His mother's death had shaped his life. He had lived alone with her ever since he could remember in the little white house in Brittany, and from the very first she had been to him the pattern of exquisite beauty. When they walked arm in arm, he had felt that every one who passed must be admiring her and envying him. Often they were. For the love he gave her was of such a kind that it made her eyes brilliant; it was a delicate and tempered air in which she could breathe and flower. When he was only ten,

he knew this, knew more than this, that they lived mysteriously by one another. Away from her, even in the hours he spent at the *lycée*, he was uprooted and like to wither. His silences would have made him unpopular, had he not been one of the best swimmers in a school where there was hardly any other sport. One day when he came home, he told her how he had swum out to the first sea-mark in the estuary, how he lay on the buoy in the sun.

"I could see this house quite plainly, darling. I wondered what you were doing." Instead of looking at him, she turned away.

"Havy, I'm glad you're such a good swimmer, really glad . . . but . . . please don't tell me when you're going to swim, please don't."

To his silence at school corresponded her silence at home. Her flower closed tight in his absence. She became precise, almost severe, and her manner of saying "Josephine" changed completely. "Josephine, je te défends de. . . ." But Josephine knew she had only to wait till the evening, when she brought the coffee out to them in the garden, to get what she wanted—a new casserole, or some contrivance for beating eggs that

Madame Marchand's Mélanie had shown her over the palisade. "Josephine, j'ai été un peu méchante cet après-midi. Vous pouvez . . . demain . . . c'est une excellente idée." If Josephine had been extravagant, Mrs. Boston, who had to live on a naval lieutenant's pension and the interest of a thousand pounds left eventually to her son, would have ruined herself in the after-dinner half-hours of a single month and taken delight in doing so.

How clever Mr. Boston was neither she nor he very well knew. She took his word for it that everything taught at the *lycée* was dull, except M. Laurent's lessons in Virgil. When one day he brought home a medal for mathematics, she entirely agreed with him that it was a miraculous joke, and laughed when he repeated to her some propositions in analytical geometry. But she invited M. Laurent to dinner regularly, and set Josephine to find out what he particularly liked to eat. She was disappointed, and Josephine disgusted, to find it was only pancakes with minced veal in them.

"Voyez-vous, les professeurs n'ont pas la bouche fine," said Josephine.

But veal pancakes they had every fortnight,

after Josephine had made a special journey to her aunt at Plougastel to learn the authentic way of making them. Mrs. Boston herself came to like veal pancakes; somehow her taste for them made up for her not knowing any Virgil. She praised Josephine more warmly for her pancakes than for her chickens and her tournedos. That seemed to Josephine extravagant; and all she would say in reply was:

“Ça doit être nourrissant pour le pauvre professeur, tout de même.”

Mrs. Boston looked forward to these dinners, even though Monsieur Laurent never talked about Virgil as she wanted him to, but almost invariably about Napoleon; except that one evening he said to her son:

“Don’t you find that Madame your mother is very like Camilla?”

And Havy—his real names were Duncan Havelock Boston—for some odd reason blushed furiously.

“Who was Camilla?” she asked.

They looked at each other like conspirators, and smiled understandingly.

“Who *was* Camilla?” she asked her son again when Monsieur Laurent had gone.

“She was a princess . . . who walked

. . . as though she were going over the tops of the corn in a field."

"Is that all?"

"That was what Monsieur Laurent meant."

"Do I walk like that?"

"Yes, something, darling."

"How lovely!" And she began to walk up and down the passage, lifting her dress to watch her brocade shoes. He held the pink-shaded lamp.

"There, don't you see?"

"I believe you, Havy," she said.

When he was nearly eighteen, Mr. Boston went to Paris, with thirty shillings a week, and the vague idea of a doctorate. He listened to Bergson and Durkheim and Seignobos without any enthusiasm; he put most of that into the long letters which he wrote his mother every day. They were rather bewildered. An immense number of things seemed to be happening; people of all nations were writing oddly and painting strangely. "I don't understand it at all, darling. But there's a fierce-looking man, who hardly ever shaves, who sits opposite me at the pension where I have dinner. Once a week he drinks three bottles of white wine and six raw eggs at a sitting. He comes

from some queer part of Russia. He took me to a revolutionary meeting with him last night; but they forgot all about the revolution in five minutes, and began to talk about painting. Particularly about some one called Picasso. One of them had a photograph of a painting by this man; it looked like a fiddle coming at you in sections out of a dream. It was very queer, but I didn't understand it a bit. But there's a Manet—that is, a picture by a man called Edouard Manet—I saw the other day which I like tremendously. It reminded me of you. But I don't think that's the reason why I liked it, though of course it ought to be. . ."

Anourits—for that was the Russian's incredible name—did his best to educate the taste of the lady-like Englishman in pictures and women and food. Perhaps, if Anourits's ears had not been so large, his eyes less innocently blue, his corn-stubble hair less preposterously covered than by a huge check cap of a peculiar Russian cut, Mr. Boston might have examined his theories of art as seriously as he examined his curious dishes; but nothing would have induced him to pay any attention to Anourits's views on women, which were super-Nietzschean; not because

of his mother—nothing that the Russian could say or do was real enough for her to be evoked—but simply because Anourits once introduced him to a perfectly ordinary little model with a prodigious air of mystery. The sight of Anourits bowing his stubbly head, with an enormous doffing of his balloon-like cap, and rolling his periwinkle eyes in front of a rather stupid girl who did not know whether to laugh or be alarmed, definitely decided Mr. Boston that Anourits, and a great deal of artistic Paris beside him, belonged to fantastic comedy. That was a summary conclusion, but it suited well with his disinclination to rub shoulders with the world.

His two years in Paris had been no more than a spectacle; yet he enjoyed them and derived more from them than he knew. "I don't know why, darling," he wrote to his mother, "but I waste an extraordinary amount of time here just looking at things. If I do that, you say, why don't I tell you more about them? That's the queer thing. This afternoon I sat in front of a café for four solid hours, and at the end I hadn't the faintest idea *what* I had seen. Just people, as we used to say. And it isn't what I see that interests me and keeps me there. It's

—no, I don't know how to explain it. Perhaps it's a curious kind of twilight that this stream of things brings into my head. That's only a way of saying they make me dizzy, probably ; what is strange, if it is dizziness, is that I like it. It makes things mysterious, somehow." He spent a good deal of time cultivating this mysterious dizziness in cafés ; his window, also, gave him a sideways glimpse of the Luxembourg gardens and the Boulevard Saint Michel. He read little, and thought less. When he came home he was perfectly frank about it.

" You know, darling, I'm not doing anything at all. If I do go to any lectures they're never twice on the same subject, and I've even got to the point of going geologizing to Fontainebleau with a lady professor—only once, of course. You really ought to put your foot down. Tell me what I have to be, there's a darling. Say you'll cut me off, please do."

" Don't be ridiculous, Havy."

He brushed his hair back on his head in comic despair. " You're ruining a promising boy, that's what you're doing."

" But you're so economical. You've never asked me for anything. And you buy me

these presents. I'm sure you don't have enough to eat."

"Well, if you won't save me, and you're quite sure you can afford it, I will have another thirty pounds' worth. Perhaps I shall see daylight this time."

What he meant by "seeing daylight" it would be impossible to say; but it was something over and beyond the choice of a career—a peremptory indication of the way he was to go. But long before the thirty pounds were spent he was called home by a telegram from Josephine. Within a fortnight his mother was dead.

In the ecstasy of his cold despair he sold the house and all that it contained. He found himself with two thousand pounds and went straight to London. With his frugal habits he might well have lived on the two pounds a week which his capital brought him; but to spend days of emptiness brooding upon the past, in tense and unrelenting hatred of the cruelty of life, was impossible, not to be thought of. He was afraid of himself. The thing to do was to take up some work that was hateful and submit himself to it by force of will. Yes, will was the secret.

He took up various secretaryships, changing them as soon as he felt any danger of his becoming permanently involved with his employer's fortunes, whether by attachment or for his own comfort's sake. During two years he spent with a stockbroker he doubled his capital. Then he became afraid of the fascination of money-dealing and joined Mr. Elihu Thomson, a prosperous coal merchant with political ambitions. Mr. Thomson, whom nature had modelled after the physical pattern of the dour American big-business man, with a lined ascetic face and a straight fringe of close, brown-grey hair, engaged him rather with a view to politics than coal, and meant that he should have an easy time. He would gladly have made him his confidant, for he was a lonely and simple man. But Mr. Boston's precise and frigid manner chilled him. He became nervous in his presence, and, to hide his nervousness, brusque and overbearing; he heaped unnecessary work upon him in the vague hope that he would one day break out and be human. Instead, Mr. Boston became an adept at compiling useless statistics and drawing up impeccable reports. His various memoranda on the Rochton Coal and Iron

Company gained for his employer the undisturbed confidence of his fellow directors. Mr. Thomson gave up the effort to understand his secretary without feeling the least gratitude for his devotion. He felt that he was not the cause, but only the occasion of it. Yet in Mr. Thomson's private diary were many entries such as these: "*Mem.* To tell B. I will double his salary." (It was £300.) "*Mem.* To tell Boston he is to have two months' holiday abroad at my expense." "*Mem.* To ask B. if he would care to come shooting." But they never received the little tick in pencil with which Mr. Thomson registered his duties done. His nerve failed him.

Mr. Boston worked at Cadogan Square from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. On Saturdays he went away at two o'clock. He had done this for four years now, with the exception of the week's holiday at Christmas and the fortnight in the summer for which he had originally stipulated; and he saw no reason why it should not go on for forty years. In the evenings he read, or wandered interminably in the London streets. He was accosted by women, he watched street-fights, he sat in the remote seats of cinemas, drank

at coffee-stalls, saw women sleeping in mid-winter on the Embankment, women fighting each other amid a crowd of cheering men in Seven Dials, stared over bridges at the filthy yet regal Thames, listened to men preaching exasperated atheism in the Park, wondered at piercing solitary cries in the night. It was a sharp and jagged world, irremediably alien to him. He liked London best when a heavy rain was falling. The sudden sprouting of innumerable umbrellas, the sharp scream of the cab-whistles, the policemen standing unperturbed in their gleaming waterproofs, the soft sound of hurrying footsteps, the eager rush of water in the gurgling gutters, the bright shining of the wet roadways, the touch of the drops on his own face, comforted and thrilled him; he felt in these moments that he became a member of the great city.

He read, not in order to know, but in order to be lost; yet he found that he could not lose himself in anything but the real. He could not return to Dickens, even though in memory it seemed to him as marvellous as ever. Indeed, the only story in which he could count on being lost was Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Instead of authors' works

he read their biographies, their journals, their letters; and he was often deeply disappointed by them. He read much history, and enough astronomy to know that in all probability there are a hundred thousand universes like our own swimming in the infinite of space; enough anthropology to be aware that morality is the product of an unsteady evolution. And it seemed to him that these things were as they should be, and that he had not expected them to be otherwise.

He formed a few acquaintances. The chief of them was with an enthusiastic journalist a year younger than himself, whose name was Bettington. Boston had met him on a wet night in summer when the theatres were emptying. The rain, heavy enough before, suddenly fell in torrents. The smooth asphalt streets were white with bubbles and foam. Into the doorway where he had taken shelter, although armed with a long mackintosh and a big umbrella, a man and a woman hurried, breathless and wet.

"*Please* don't look for a taxi," she said, laying her hand on his sleeve. "You'll only get wetter still. The millionaires have bought them all. I don't mind a bit. I

love the rain." She stretched out a small hand to catch the heavy drops.

"But how will you get home?" The man clapped his hand to his forehead tragically, tilting his felt hat. A stream of water flowed from the brim on to his velvet jacket.

They laughed. She became serious.

"It's terrible that you should be so wet. You have really got another coat in the office?"

"As if anything could get through this!" He showed her the thickness of the black corduroy. "But how *are* you going to get home?"

"I shall go by the Tube when the crowds have died down."

"I know that Tube of yours. You can choose between Sloane Square and South Kensington—a mile to walk either way."

"But the rain will have stopped by then. This kind of rain never keeps on; it can't. You'll see."

"The problem is to get to the Tube."

"It's no good going just now. It's sure to be crowded. . . . But what will you find to write about that ghastly play? And yet I think I should have enjoyed it awfully

if I hadn't been thinking of you. I loved the Colonel. . . . What was his name? The man in the red jacket and the cigar. I counted the number of whiskies and sodas he poured out for himself altogether. It was fourteen—thirteen or fourteen. It can't be real whisky, can it?"

"No," he said professionally, "it's only lemon-squash."

"Fourteen lemon-squashes . . . on a rainy night! That makes it worse. . . . Tell me what you're going to write about it."

"I'm afraid I shan't write anything at all," he said seriously, "unless I get to the office soon."

She stepped forward. "Let's go now. It's not my kind of rain after all. I don't believe it ever will stop."

He pulled her back by the arm. "No, you musn't really, Felicia. You'll be getting another of your chills." The thought sobered them both.

Then Mr. Boston intervened. "May I lend you my umbrella? It's a very big one. Quite big enough for two."

The man jumped at the offer; he had been really worried.

"That's extraordinarily good of you."

He was so surprised that "extraordinarily" was very mixed up.

"But what will you do yourself?" She had slender, arched, black eyebrows.

"He's got his mackintosh," said the man. "It's very, very kind of you. I'll bring it back to-morrow. Will you give me your address?"

Mr. Boston gave it.

"Why, that's not very far from me. Look here, I'll bring it in some time to-morrow, but I can't promise when. Would to-morrow evening do?"

"Perfectly."

They hurried off, packed close under the umbrella. He was a good six inches taller than she, and rather ungainly by her side. Mr. Boston could see him changing step, and the umbrella swaying perilously.

He finished his supper quickly the next evening, and stuck an envelope on the door. "Please leave umbrella on the landing. Quite safe.—D.H.B." When he reached the street he wavered, then went slowly upstairs again, tore off the envelope, and settled down to a fat London library volume, *The Psychology of Buddhism*. After a few minutes he gave it up and began to

prepare some coffee. He was grinding the beans when the knock came.

Bettington had evidently become more deeply impressed during the day. "I've been working in London ten years now, and I've never had an umbrella lent me by a total stranger before," he said.

He still wore a velvet jacket ; it emphasized the touch of clumsiness in his big bony features and reddish wrists. He also experimented a good deal in finding a place for his cup and saucer.

Then he began to talk, in jerks of volubility, separated by long intervals of silence.

Bettington was an enthusiast, though it would have been hard to say precisely what he was enthusiastic about. He was clumsy like Anourits, but his clumsiness was not comic like his. It seemed to fit his lack of control ; his eagerness needed these spasmodic gestures. He waved his arms about loosely in the effort to explain to Mr. Boston that life, in spite of astronomy and anthropology, was exciting.

"Things *are* happening, you see. I'm only an obscure journalist, so I've no bias. I mean, I don't have to believe that I'm making them happen. Besides, I don't think anybody is making them happen. It's just a process.

Just think : even you and I have seen the complete decay of the whole Victorian system. It simply dissolved in the night, during the war. Now everybody's very bold, very dashing, and very uncomfortable. No one knows what's what any longer. It used to be quite certain that you were rather wicked if you ran away with somebody else's wife. I don't mean that every one else thought you were. But you felt very uneasy yourself. Now you still feel quite uneasy—for quite different reasons. Chiefly because there's nothing to feel uneasy about. And that feels very queer."

"Is that what you call something happening?"

"Well, don't you?"

"Yes," said Boston. "But I don't see that there's anything to be excited about in it."

"I'm not excited. I'm interested. I want to know what's going to happen, to you, to me, to all of us. In twenty years' time we may be quite unrecognizable. It depends on whether a singleminded man appears with a real belief in a moral idea."

Mr. Boston looked curiously at him.

"Hasn't it struck you that this is the very

moment for a prophet ? ” Bettington swerved aside. It was his way. “ Take, for instance, Miss Mortimer—the woman with me last night. She’s something quite new in England. She’s been mixed up with the suffrage—that’s a queer complicated movement if you look into it—she’s extraordinarily clever, and unlike most of her kind she keeps her cleverness to herself. If I really want to get the hang of anything that’s worrying me, I take it along to her. But that’s not the point. The point is that she’s dead against marrying. Lots of women are nowadays ; but she’s also dead against sentimentalizing over free love and unmarried mothers and all that. She says that the only nice women nowadays are the old-fashioned grandmothers. She would go back and be one if she could ; but as she can’t she won’t have anything. That’s an odd state of mind.”

Mr. Boston supposed that she had refused to marry Bettington.

“ I see what you mean. I suppose one’s born either interested or not interested. I was born uninterested.”

“ Even that’s very characteristic.”

Mr. Boston first resented the imputation ; then found it comfortable.

He listened to Bettington's spasmodic monologues until late that night. They fascinated him ; that seemed to show that Bettington lived in a strange world where naïve confidence was possible. He was attracted by the undisguised curiosity with which he stared round the room, looked deliberately through the titles of his books—" You don't go in much for modern literature "—and finally said to Boston, point-blank :

" There's something quite odd about this room of yours, you know. It's extraordinarily impersonal. In a positive kind of way. Not in the least like a doctor's waiting-room. I shouldn't think there were many loose ends about you."

Mr. Boston declined Bettington's invitation to dinner, but asked him to come to tea on Sunday. Slowly their Sunday tea had become a habit. It was always at Boston's ; he had never been to Bettington's. He did not want to meet any of Bettington's friends. Also, he had made an imaginary background for Bettington which he did not want to have disturbed by the reality.

When they talked, it was Bettington who made the running. Mr. Boston occasionally asked a question, which Bettington would

think rather subtle, but he genuinely preferred to listen. Without meaning to, Bettington told him a great deal about books and plays as they appeared; he gave him *résumés* of Bernard Shaw's speeches and H. G. Wells's articles—for both men he had a sincere admiration—and like an elusive but persistent thread in the carpet which Bettington unrolled before him, Mr. Boston found Miss Mortimer's views on books and life and men and women. In return for all this Mr. Boston occasionally gave a fragment of out-of-the-way history or biography. If Bettington made use of these in his work, as he sometimes did, he scrupulously told Mr. Boston on his next visit.

Unconsciously Bettington became sincerely fond of Mr. Boston. He felt sorry for him; he had so obviously "missed it." But what he had missed, and whether there was any reason to regret that it had been missed, Bettington could not say. Miss Mortimer pressed him about this one evening. She had begun to be impatient of his growing habit of referring to Mr. Boston's "extraordinary" abilities and hostile destiny.

"I don't believe in dark horses," she said decisively. "Really important people are

always obvious." It may be that she was a little hurt that Boston had never shown any desire to see her again ; for sometimes she regretted that she had not herself taken back the umbrella.

But she was perfectly right. Mr. Boston was not really important. Whether only really important people are to be believed in is another matter.

CHAPTER II

THE ESCAPE

“ J’ai la pudeur de la souffrance, comme l’animal blessé qui se retire dans la solitude pour y souffrir longtemps ou pour y succomber sans plainte.”— *Gerard de Nerval*.

MR. BOSTON folded up his typewriter and neatly packed away the notes of Mr. Thomson’s speech in the case. As often before when he had yielded to memories, he felt at the end of his tether ; as often before, he felt that he could not face Bettington at tea that afternoon. The effort not to let himself go would be too much for him ; while to let himself go was unthinkable. Besides, what was there to let go ? His hatred of life and his fear of it ? His memories ? The hatred without the memories was stupid, commonplace ; the memories were inviolable.

No, the truth was that he was utterly empty. Something went on inside him, no doubt, but it was trivial and uninteresting ;

as trivial and uninteresting as the remains of his lunch or the street he was looking on through the window now. A long stretch of grey and dusty asphalt with a red Furniture Depository, labelled with a huge blue enamel sign, to close the vista. Three dirty children playing hop-scotch among the cabbage leaves outside the derelict greengrocer's. The shutters were barred askew and scribbled with chalk. Beyond, the newspaper shop and barber's. Opposite, the high brick wall of an elementary school. Against the pavement edge a man with a barrow-load of cherries, a patch of glistening beauty caught in the arid waste. On the kerb by his side two louts holding paper bags, spitting the stones across the street. He could just see them hopping, hopping, in the calm and tepid air.

Had he made a mistake in so cutting himself off from his kind? One needed to be half-mad even to conceive the idea of revenging oneself on life. If he had made some real friends, would things have been different? It would only mean a half-dozen Bettingtons instead of one, a Bettington for dinner as well as one for tea.

He stared on out of the open window with

his chin in his hands. What if it were all a dream, all of it? He reached out mechanically for the walking-stick in the corner and levelled it like a rifle at the barrow-man, taking long and thoughtful aim at his rusty bowler hat. Just as he was pulling the trigger he noticed that he was firing into the man's face. Good God! The man had turned round; he was looking at him. Mr. Boston started back. His stick fell, clattering malevolently, two stories down on to the pavement.

He leaned against the wall; his heart thumped and he was very hot. Then he began to laugh. He must go down and get his walking-stick. There was a test.

He began to rehearse openings. "I'm afraid I dropped my walking-stick . . ." "Have you by any chance seen a walking-stick? . . ." "I think that's my walking-stick. . . ." It depended on the situation. He put on his straw-hat, picked up a book from the lunch table, and went downstairs, pale and calm.

He reconnoitred from the obscurity of the dingy hall. The barrow-man and the louts were talking together. The man held the stick in his hand. Now he was raising it to point at the window.

Mr. Boston walked boldly forward, his eyes fixed on the Furniture Depository.

"I rather think that's my walking-stick." He felt the stare of the louts' two pairs of eyes; he concentrated upon an angry blotch on the side of the barrow-man's nose.

"I suppose it is a walking-stick, mister," said the man with ominous politeness, trying to unscrew the handle.

"Why, what do you mean? Of course it's a walking-stick."

"Wot do I mean? Well"—the voice took on a portentous cunning—"it didn't look like a walking-stick when you was 'oldin' it up at the winder."

Mr. Boston did not reply.

"It's a nice little stick," mused the man, "a pretty little stick. It'd come in very 'andy. I tell you wot, mister. I should think this little stick's worth 'arf a dollar to somebody."

"Perhaps it is." Mr. Boston's voice also became thoughtful. "But not to me." The way to get out of this was to make a joke. Mr. Boston was not good at making jokes. "Look here! I'll let you have it for a shilling. You'll make a good profit."

"I dunno anyone round 'ere as goes in for

shootin' now. They've all took to Polo." One of the louts, having finished his cherries, guffawed.

"Well then, I'll make you a present of it."

"I ain't much of a shot meself, either."

Another guffaw. The three little children stopped their game of hop-sotch and trailed across the street, led by a tousled girl. The barber was looking curiously across from his shop door. There was no time to lose.

"I'll give you sixpence for it," said Mr. Boston.

"Make it a bob, mister; make it a bob."

He was being abominably weak, failing at the test; but still . . . He took a shilling from his waistcoat pocket. The man handed him his stick with a grin.

"You can 'ave another shot for the same money." Then with a burst of generosity: "You can 'ave it for nothin'." He stretched out his arms like a scarecrow.

Mr. Boston reddened and tried to laugh. "No, thanks," he said shortly, and walked on, unhurried, towards the Furniture Depository.

He heard the voices behind him. "Good ole Jim . . . Orf 'is — chump . . ."

He was strangely upset. When he turned

the corner he felt as though he had escaped from a street swept by machine-guns.

He jumped on to a Hampstead 'bus. Yes, it was half-past three. Bettington would be there in half an hour. It couldn't be helped ; he was not going to run the gauntlet of that street again. No, he was tired of tests, for one day anyhow.

He looked like a sick man, palely determined to suppress some inward pain.

When the 'bus stopped, he turned abruptly aside from the road which climbed the heath and walked slowly up a street of quiet houses.

Half-way he paused on the hill and looked back. It would be pleasant to doze in a pew of that prim, secluded, box-like church, "Dearly bloved brethrn, Scripture movth us . . . manifold sinsawickness." The blazing afternoon sun touched the neat brass knockers with a finger of gold, made cool green lattices of the shutters against the white stucco walls. In a garden full of the palest yellow lupins, hardly more substantial than flame in sunlight, two little girls with bobbed black hair were talking. He peered through the bushes at them. The smaller one stood with her hands clasped behind her and her

back to him. What delightful legs! They wobbled at the knees.

"I like Goosey Gander best," she piped.

"It's not in our new book," said the other.

"It's in mine. I'll show you." And she ran indoors.

He tried to remember Goosey Gander, but in vain.

The trees on the heath, solid waves of dark and massive green, reposed him. A sea without storms, infinitely safe. He wanted to sit down, to listen, to drink in, to be saturated. He looked irresolutely about him; there was nothing to sit on. Then something vaguely familiar in the windows of a plain white house on the other side of the road caught his wandering eyes. Where had he seen those arched embrasures?

Good Heavens! That must be Keats's house. There was Keats, bodily and beautiful, in a direct, matter-of-fact way, very small, sitting on the lawn, laughing. A fat man was sitting near him in tight plaid trousers, with a little table by his side. On the table was a tray with a jug and a glass. He was laughing, too. That was Brown making one of his ghastly puns. Now the laughter

stopped. Keats was nursing one leg over the other. Now he was stooping to pick up little chunks of earth to throw at Brown's tray.

And Keat was—twenty-two? Twenty-three? He could not remember the dates. He was thirty. He whistled hollowly. *Pheee-ew*. Keats had a far harder time than he had. What was it made one man so different from another? Keats was there, ill, yet planted in life as solidly as one of those trees. He had roots. Life flowed into him. If only Keats were really there! He would go in and ask him. His fingers trembled on the latch of the gate. He could not have lifted it. Why not?

He went further up the hill and found a seat, and sat with his straw-hat tilted over his eyes, drawing idle patterns in the gravel with his walking-stick. Bettington was there now. He looked at his watch. No, he had been and gone, more than an hour ago. How quickly that hour had slipped by, how smoothly and graciously! If only he could keep on like that, with a shining thought to turn slowly in his hands, like a beautiful vase, from hour to hour. Something that was not him or his, that he regarded curiously,

and looked back upon without regret as it disappeared.

Only a little change, some infinitesimal convolution of his brain differently twisted, and it might be all as dream-like as that hour. Yet he might as well hope to hold the sun in his hands as make that change. Things, men, life, rushed at him out of the void, collided with, crushed him, set his whole frame jarring and jangling, while a remote corner of his brain whispered that it all might be only a thought. It whispered so timidly. That was the trouble. How could he believe a thing that did not believe itself? You had to start with a conviction, a certainty.

"To him that hath it shall be given, even more than he hath: but from him that hath not it shall be taken away even that which he hath." Even that which he hath. What incredibly wise words they were! When you were a child they seemed a kind of secret nonsense and stuck in your head. When you grew up, they suddenly seemed to contain everything. What had he? Nothing. A bundle of memories, a bundle of relics, that fitted nowhere, that simply refused to become part of life. They had nothing to do with it, far less even than he had sitting there

now, while the church bells began to ring, and the old ladies, with their hats perched high on their hair, carried their little prayer-books docilely up the hill. And the nothing that he had would assuredly be taken away from him. How could he hope to keep it? He was turned backward, trying to clutch it to himself, while something, the jarred and jangled whole of him, was borne forward.

There was nothing to be done. Perhaps he made a mistake in trying to do anything. He made efforts; perhaps it was a mistake to make efforts. Surrender, rather.

Mr. Boston made his first surrender by walking slowly on across the heath. The snorting motor-bicycles, the stiffly promenading lovers, the monotonously uncertain bugles of the Boy Scouts, the shrieks of little boys and girls in clumsy Sunday clothes, plunging from the road down into the bushes, and emerging, red-faced and panting, on to the road again, made a hazy horizon to his consciousness. A small fresh wind blew untainted from the north. He took off his straw-hat. The breeze was too mild to disturb his neatly parted hair.

He felt relaxed, almost happy. A procession of curious thoughts began to pass before

his mind. Yet they were hardly thoughts. It was rather as though out of a dull background, shining, brilliant spaces appeared; out of an indistinguishable buzz of sound such as may be heard rising from London on a still day in this very Hampstead where he was, intervals of luminous silence. The two little girls in the garden: their high-pitched voices made no sound. His last meeting with Bettington a week ago. At the end of a silence Bettington had bent forward abruptly and said: "It's very queer how. . ." They had drawn back from the brink. His mother's death with the mother-of-pearl mirror in her hands. Poking his fingers through the wire-netting at the raspberries in their neighbours' garden—years ago, that must have been; he could get his whole hand through the mesh. Sucking the crushed berries off his fingers in the sun.

Out of the threadbare texture of his life they gleamed! Each seemed to lend its light to the others and receive it back again. What were they? Why did they shine?

Some were sad, some were happy. Rather, they once were sad or happy, now they were neither. They were like that drawerful of his mother's possessions. A faded tartan

needle-case and Keats throwing clods in the garden. Why did they salute each other, like friends met after death? Gravely, predestined, comprehending.

Nonsense! How could these detached moments of memory salute and comprehend one another? Had they bodies, had they souls? But what brought them together? Whence came their still, bright harmony? Had he anything to do with it? Did he summon and order them?

Why, they *pitied* him. It was all mad, no doubt. The more foolish to argue against it. These moments, these pictures, these visions, insisted that they were things of power and personality. They had a virtue finer than his own. Yet surely it must be somehow his, part of his being.

In vain he tried to smother his anxiety with words. Subconscious! Did labelling things make them other than they were. Subconscious! The sheer, imbecile inconsequence of the word. "You're giving way," murmured a cold voice. "Giving way!" That was what he had to do. Something was making a claim on him, a claim that he dimly recognized. But what was the claim? How was he to submit to it?

He was talking wild nonsense. What did all this argument of claim and submission mean? Who was to submit and to what? He was being dragged into a fairy-land. A little too potent, a little too troublesome, for a fairy-land. "He that loseth his life for My sake shall save it." How these sayings kept cropping up! He mustn't be sentimental.

He had wandered haphazard, by instinct always making for the open country and the trees. Now they ended suddenly in a shameful eruption of degraded streets, the metallic screech of overhead tram-wires.

He got on to a tram, plunging almost into the arms of the jaded conductor. "Does this take me into the country?"

"Barnet, yer mean." The conductor pulled viciously at the bell. "This goes ter th' Archway. Why the 'ell can't yer look? Think I've got nothing better ter do than stop the bleedin' tram for. . ."

The whining, exasperated voice dwindled away into the dusty afternoon. Mr. Boston looked wearily after the disappearing tram. He must not be sentimental.

Another tram swung stridently up. This time he saw the bright sign, "Archway."

The voice of the conductor had rasped him like the sharpening of a saw. His taut nerves suddenly sagged. The bright visions were plunged in greyness ; the meaning calms dissolved into a tumult of unmeaning noise. He felt the instant burden of an immense fatigue. The utter sordidness of life ! What was the use of trying to escape it ? Be a man and face it. What he had to escape was the desire to escape. And then the voice came in its subtlest accents. It was treachery he had meditated, treachery. He must be loyal to his mother's pain.

He was bewildered. How could the same thing bear two utterly different meanings ? One must be a lie. He must wait.

In that moment he drew back to the kerb, and the London tram screeched angrily away.

He pushed open the door of the stale saloon of the public-house.

" Oh lord," said the barmaid, peering at him through a glass barricade, " you do look queer. Gimme quite a turn, you did."

" Sorry. I *am* faint. Give me a brandy . . . and a biscuit, please." Of course, he'd eaten nothing since lunch, hours ago.

" Bin overdoin' it, *I* should say."

"I forgot my tea."

He munched his woolly biscuit, gazing at the string of dead flies that hung from the chandelier. Oaths and cackling laughter flowed in a steady stream from the next compartment; the sharp ping of the till rose above the raucous babble.

Face that, he thought, as the brandy began to work. Very well, but why rub his nose in it?

But when he passed into the street again, he felt that nothing had been decided. He was not going back, that was all; he was going to give himself the chance to decide instead of running away. What he had to decide had become vague, misty, utterly impalpable.

As he sat alone in the front of the Barnet tram it seemed to him that his fixed purpose was like the persistence of a drunken man. Its object was without form and void. He had tumbled down from unfamiliar heights; now a sheer smooth wall without a foothold confronted him. The voice of a wise nurse whispered that he must not worry about that now. The great tram rocked him like a giant cradle.

He had plenty of money, for he had made

it a rule always to carry ten clean pound notes in his exemplary wallet. Barnet must be on the edge of the country. Barnet Fair? The Battle of Barnet? Fourteen eighty-three? Five? He was very ignorant of the London that lay outside his regular orbit—Hampstead, St. John's Wood, Chelsea, the City; beyond those it was a no man's land. He would walk on out of Barnet and put up at the first clean inn; he was good for another half-dozen miles in the cool of the evening. A vague bright picture of clean coarse sheets, family photographs in uniform, foolhardy moths dropping singed into an enamel candlestick, casement windows opening on to refreshed night air, the ridiculous perseverance of croaking toads, rose before him. How delightful it was! But he must buy something to eat at this Barnet. He couldn't expect to be given a meal late on Sunday night.

He fed in a first floor tea-room full of Sunday couples who had reached the stage of sentimental silence. It was strange, he thought, how their attitudes ran to type. The man leaned back on the red plush seat that ran round the wall; the woman leaned her head on his shoulder. She was always

on his right, and her right hand was always fingering his sleeve, his watch-chain or his coat lapel. Even the fair-haired man in pince-nez who was solemnly vamping out "If you were the only girl in the world" on the reluctant piano submitted to the ritual. A girl in pink, with a wad of black hair low down on her pasty neck, had flung her arm round his shoulder and was perched insecurely on all that remained of the stool.

Mr. Boston sipped luxuriously at his rich red-brown tea. The road below, as he glanced out of the window, teemed with promenading couples. He glanced back at the couples against the wall—not one had moved—and it seemed to him that there was something beautiful, yes, absurd, pathetic and beautiful, in their surrender to a common beatitude. He was out of place there, an intruder, a spy, an incomplete, hypertrophied thing; he was almost ashamed of himself. Not that he wanted a woman to lean her head against his shoulder, but he wanted to be as definite and unconscious as they were. No, hardly that. Rather to pay for his draught of beauty, to make some return for what was being given to him.

He heard the trumpets of a Salvation Army

meeting blare, then fray untidily into silence. A single voice then carried down the street : " Ar Farther . . . Which art . . . in 'Eaven . . ." What a strange, amazing world !

The waitress, a small girl of about seventeen with a mass of frizzed hair, put down his final scone so carelessly that the knife clattered to the floor.

" Oh, I *say*; I am sorry."

Mr. Boston and she bent down together to pick it up. Their heads all but bumped. She got the knife, straightened herself laughing, and held it out to him, patting the back of her hair with her other hand. She looked at him closely and liked what she saw.

" Nearly had a collision," she said.

" Tired ? "

" Not tired. Fed up. Too much of a good thing—Sundays." Her face was freckled ; her nose tilted and small. She was absurd under her mountain of hair.

" It's nearly over now, surely," he said.

" Half-past eight." She went to the window and looked at the church clock. " Just on. Thank goodness. Then I go out." She sat down on the cushioned seat beside him. " You don't live here ? "

" No."

"I thought you didn't."

"Why?"

"You look different."

"But these people don't live here, either, do they?" He nodded slightly towards the couples.

"No, but that's different."

It would have been unfair to ask her what she meant. She was only saying that she liked the look of him. Good God! Why not?

"Are you going back to London?" she pursued.

"Why, this is London, isn't it?"

"Oh, *no*! This is Barnet."

"I see."

"Didn't you know where you were, really?"

"I knew I was in Barnet. But I didn't know that Barnet wasn't London."

"How *could* it be?" She said it so seriously that he looked at her hard. Why, she was just a child. His eye wandered again to her mountain of fluffed-out hair.

"But nowadays they say Richmond is in London, you know," he said apologetically.

"That's because it *is*, I suppose."

He took a deep draught of his generous tea.

"You didn't say whether you were going back to London."

"No, no. I'm not," he said.

"Are you stopping here?"

"No, I'm going on."

"How I do have to drag things out of you," she said severely.

He felt that he deserved the rebuke; he must make a clean breast of it to this devouring innocence.

"Well, you see, it's complicated. I am going on. But I don't know where I'm going to. If I had known, I would have told you immediately—im-med-i-ate-ly."

Her bright eyes glanced at him suspiciously, then scanned the pegs. He was about to be found out, he knew. No bag, no knapsack; only a walking-stick and a book on *The Psychology of Buddhism*.

"No, I haven't got one," he said.

She coloured with surprise. "You are clever; you look clever."

"Not really. . . . But now you know all about me. . . ."

"I don't know anything about you. I mean," she added hurriedly, "I know you're all right. But fancy you not knowing where you're going—and not having any

luggage. I could understand it if it was friends."

"So could I."

She looked at him dubiously. Well, he was a queer one and no mistake. But then what nice eyes he had, that looked at you gently—not sloppily—and seemed to smile as though . . . as though he were remembering something nice to compare you to.

"Which way are you going? . . . How stupid of me! Of course you don't know." She looked at him severely. "Would you like me to show you the road?"

"Very much," said Mr. Boston. "Do you know, I was wondering whether you would say that."

"Were you, Mr. Presumption! Well, I'll be ready in five minutes if you'll wait for me downstairs." She jumped up. Only two of the couples remained, immobile, oblivious. In a high-pitched, business-like voice she called: "Closing-time, ladies and gentlemen, *please!*" and began to pack the chairs on to the tables. Mr. Boston had hardly time to gather his hat, his bill and his book, before they were all piled but his own.

"Put up your own, yourself, will you?" she called from the doorway as she herded her

four reluctant sheep down the stairs. Suddenly the light went out. He put up his chair in the twilight, made his way gingerly through the room and descended into the street.

The Salvation Army had begun another hymn—"Rock of Ages." She was as good as her word. Long before it had come to its ragged, quavering end, she was on the pavement by his side, had put her arm through his, and was saying: "My name's Dorothy. What's yours?"

Mr. Boston was not prepared for that. Not for years had anyone asked him what his name was. Even in Paris—a whole lifetime ago—he had never been anything more than *le petit Anglais*, and that although he was not so very small. No one had called him "Havy" except his mother.

She looked up at him from under her broad-brimmed hat. "Don't you want to tell me?" Her voice was childishly disappointed.

"Why on earth not? My name's Boston."

"That's not your real name, is it?"

"Why should I make it up?"

"But they don't call you Boston, do they? Your friends, I mean."

"Always—never anything else."

"Truly?"

"Truly."

She thought it over for a moment. Then she made up her mind. "Well, I shan't. It sounds too stuck up. And if it doesn't sound stuck up, it's silly. You might as well be Tango."

"Just as well. Why not call me Tango?"

She looked at him dubiously again. No, he was quite serious. He must be stupid. But then . . .

"D'you mean to say you'd really like to be called Tango?"

"I don't know that there's anything I'd really like to be called. Certainly not Boston. I like Tango much better than that, much better."

"But it's a dog's name, p'raps a monkey's. Something in a circus. It doesn't suit you. I don't know, though." Again she made up her mind. "Very well then, I *shall* call you Tango, and if you don't like it it's your own fault."

They walked along for a time without speaking, very gravely. Again a stray arrow of memory leaped out of the darkness and quivered in his brain. When and where had he walked so gravely before? A long trem-

bling shaft of light revealed to him a little boy and girl walking hand in hand along a white, dusty road. They both had cabbage leaves on their heads, and she held a nasturtium like a tiny tiar-lily in one hand. When a cart came by, they backed into the hedge and he all but slid into the ditch. She wiped the mud from his strapped shoe with a handkerchief as big as a postage stamp.

"This is the main road we're on now," said Dorothy. "You wanted to go further into the country."

"Yes, please."

Then followed a long silence under the dome of green sky. The leaves were faintly stirring; from over the hedge came the murmur of conversations.

"You don't talk very much . . . Tango."

"No, I'm afraid I don't. I seem to have lost the habit."

"Do you like being with me?"

"I do . . . very much."

"I like being with you . . . I wonder why. You don't talk; you don't—make love. Don't think I want to be made love to. I hate it," she said vehemently.

Silence. He felt her steps grow slower and slower.

"Don't let's go so fast," she said. "That's the last lamp. Just after that, where you can't see, close by that big tree, are the cross roads. I must go back then."

Her hand felt to his wrist and clasped it tight. They were under the last lamp now. What could he say to her? How could he tell her?

"Are you sorry it's nearly over now?" she asked.

"Terribly sorry." He would try. "The last time I felt like this was—years ago. I had forgotten all about it till just now. When I was very small I knew a little girl, and one day we went walking, holding hands. We had cabbage leaves on our heads." It was silly; these things are not to be shared.

"Is that *all*?" she asked.

"Yes, that's all, really," he said.

"I like it. . . . Were you very fond of her?"

"I must have been. But I don't remember."

They were standing at the cross roads now.

"I wish you had time to tell me another story."

"I don't know any more. And that wasn't a story, you know. It's quite true."

"Tango . . . I'm dreadfully sorry you're going. Will you write to me?"

They stood facing each other, he towards the country, she towards the town. In the light of the last lamp her eyes sparkled unnaturally.

"You're not crying?" He had an insane desire to cry himself.

"No—o, not really."

"I've made you miserable."

"No, you haven't. You've made me happy. I've made myself miserable. I'm silly. Oh, Tango!"

He held her hand; it was hot. Then she bit her lip and said:

"Please don't write to me. You don't want to, really, and I don't want you to. Good-bye, Tango."

"Good-bye . . . Dorothy." He held up her hand and kissed it.

He walked on slowly into the darkness. After a dozen steps he turned round sharply. She was hurrying away; she had passed the lamp. He went forward suddenly after her a little way, then turned about and walked on.

It seemed to him that life was stupidly beautiful; that he ought somehow to have made her happier; that he could have done so, but he was not allowed. And what he

was not allowed to do no one else could do.

Nonsense! What could he have done, had he been a thousand times allowed? Nothing more than he had done. Even now he might be a bright space in her life, something kinder and gentler than she had known. That was no good; impossible, superior, vain. She had seen just what he had seen; and she had had the courage besides.

And it seemed to him that there were two worlds, two lives—one where good things ripened to their own perfection and nothing was lost; the other where all that was good was frustrated and incomplete, where the loss was incessant and irremediable. In this one he could not bear to live and in the other it was impossible to live. He was a divided soul; he was doomed to wither.

The brilliant green had begun to fade from the sky. He must hurry along if he would find a bed that night. Why had he broken loose? He had had his life in control before and strangled disturbing thoughts at birth. It was painful, but he was master. Now it was more painful still, and he was the slave; an unformed, incoherent stuff that might never harden again. He had to wait in-

definitely to be poured into a shape of which he had no conception ; he had entered a dark tunnel from which he might never emerge.

The sky was bewilderingly brilliant with stars. Was the tunnel really so dark? What a childish argument! Yet there he was, excited, exhilarated, expectant. There was nothing to expect. A man of parts did not reach thirty without knowing exactly what life had to give. Exactly. The rest was dreams and moonshine. And dreams and moonshine were taking him along an unknown road, exciting him, refusing to be put away.

He knocked at the door of a little inn that lay back from the road behind a big lozenge of grass. In the moonlight it looked preternaturally clean, silvery, a fairy-tale house, where you paid your bill with button mushrooms for shillings. But the man who opened scarcely belonged to the picture.

"Want a room! Queer time o' night." The unmistakable implication was that not the time of night but Mr. Boston was queer. He hastened to explain.

"I meant to put up in Barnet. But the night was so fine and cool that I took the chance of pushing on."

"Shouldn't take chances at half-past ten on a Sunday night." The man looked Mr. Boston up and down. He seemed respectable enough, too respectable. "Where's your luggage?"

"I left it behind . . . in Barnet. It was too hot." He couldn't explain; he was a suspicious enough character already. Every moment he feared that the door might be slammed in his face.

"I should have stayed behind with it, if I were you."

That was forbidding; yet he had not shut the door. Mr. Boston took a desperate plunge.

"Look here. I don't know if you're worrying whether I can pay. I'll pay in advance, willingly."

The man's face broadened into a good-humoured smile. "That was about it, mister. He motioned Mr. Boston's pocket-book back. "Come in. Just wait till I fetch the missis."

Yes, photographs—in uniform; green paint, wobbly, whitewashed walls. He couldn't expect to be taken on trust; but still, why didn't people make things a little easier instead of draining one's energy away?

The landlady appeared, holding a lamp;

the bugles on her comfortable bosom winked merrily in the light.

"You've come far?"

"I've walked from London."

"Gracious! You must be tired. This way, please." And she went awkwardly up the narrow stairs, breathing heavily, lifting her skirt with her hand to each deliberate step.

"I hope this will do. It's the only one with the bed made up. We don't get many visitors."

Do! Why there the whole thing was! Casement windows open on to a moonlit garden—surely those were standard roses—a rose and trellis wallpaper, a bed big enough for Solomon. Do!

"This will suit me perfectly," he said, but he had not noticed the effect of his silence.

"I thought perhaps it wasn't what you were used to?"

What was the reply to that?

"Not at all," he said emphatically.

He went hot and cold; but it was good enough for the landlady. She lit the candle.

"Now, I'll say good-night, sir."

"Good-night, and thank you very much."

He sat on the bed in flushed dismay. What an escape! What an awful thing to

have said ! He began to laugh. But what on earth *was* the answer to her question ? " Yes, quite." Then she would have thought he wasn't the gentleman he looked. " No, hardly—but I like it the better for that." She couldn't have helped feeling offended. But " Not at all ! " He buried his face in the cool pillow and laughed again.

What a stroke of luck ! But why couldn't he take things easily instead of tormenting himself ? He didn't seem to have changed so very much.

Before he began to undress he inspected the walls. A steel engraving of Victoria and Albert at Balmoral, with Edward in short tartan sleeves ; a photograph of the Caulfield Bowling Club, 1903, another of the Caulfield Rifle Club, 1911. That must be the landlord in the middle, stiffer, but twenty years younger at the least than he looked at the door. And that was only ten years ago ! A shaded pencil drawing of a cast of plums. There seemed to be a hole in it . . . a vacuum where plum should be . . . an unplumbed cavity. Better than most of Keats's, anyhow. A calendar over the washstand : July 19. Motto for the Day : " If anything remains to be done, nothing is done.—*Roederer*." Who on earth was

Roederer? Immortality was rather cheap at that price. It wasn't even a truism. On the contrary, most untrue, positively misleading. It remained for him to get into bed; yet he had done a great deal. Getting into this inn for one thing.

Put not your trust in Roederer,
Of truth he is the murderer,
So what could be absurderer?

He broke off and washed thoroughly, but with great haste. He had undressed as far as his shirt before he realized the inconvenience of having no pyjamas. He slid naked between the sheets as into an ice-cold bath. He had never felt so utterly naked before. It would keep him awake. No harm in that; he had plenty to think about. Plenty.

Before he had got the first problem on to the blackboard, Mr. Boston had fallen asleep, with his candle still burning.

CHAPTER III

THE HAVEN

“ Je suis peut-être le seul homme au monde qui sache que ces personnes ont existé.”—*Chateaubriand*.

AT eight o'clock in the morning he awoke to the sound of gently falling rain ; it dripped lazily into the gutter outside his window. A half-dozen dead moths were strewn round his burnt-out candle That was as it should be.

But the rain was not. He had no clothes for rain ; he had no clothes at all. He jumped out of bed anxiously and looked at his collar in dismay. How detestable a grubby collar was ! Without reflecting he plunged it into the basin and covered it with soapsuds. Then it was too late to draw back. He rubbed it clean, rinsed it in fresh water, and looked at it ruefully. Would it ever dry in that rain ?

Still, he had had the sense to hang his shirt by the window. That was tolerably fresh,

anyhow. There were people who, finding themselves without pyjamas, slept in their shirts—an awful habit!

He washed himself elaborately, even more elaborately than usual. It was an extremely complicated bath, a minute prophylactic against yesterday's linen. "If something remains to be done, nothing is done," he murmured. He squatted on the bed and diligently scrubbed his feet with a nail-brush that had been left in the room. He was quite disproportionately grateful for that nail-brush. When he had finished, he stood still and expanded his chest in front of the window twenty-four times. Then he dressed.

All went well. If his clothes were not absolutely fresh, they were fresher than he had hoped; and by good luck he had brought a silk handkerchief. Draped about his neck, it looked very intentional. He brushed his hair with the nail-brush. But for his beard he would have been happy.

Twenty past nine! He should have left his rooms on the way to Cadogan Square five minutes ago. The last thing that he himself or Elihu could have expected had happened—had happened so far as Elihu was concerned with incredible ease. And he had left nothing

of his own at Cadogan Square except an old umbrella and a fountain-pen that would not work. He had always felt that Elihu might read any papers of his, and he had safeguarded himself ; besides, it was as well to be mysterious even towards a man who had no sense of mystery. He need never return to Cadogan Square again.

He sat down in the dining-room and listened through the open door to the faint sound of the landlady cooking his breakfast. Then he took out his pocket-book and began to compose a telegram.

" Bettington Clifford's Inn London please go my flat this afternoon send me linen for fortnight brown shoes raincoat tweed suit hair-brushes 'Wheatsheaf Inn' Caulfield."

He paused doubtfully, struck out " my " and " me," added " etc." after " brushes," paused again, and then with a sudden smile wrote: *" Come yourself if you possibly can ideal place Boston."*

The landlady entered with eggs and bacon. Her eyes beamed through her spectacles. He asked her which was the nearest telegraph office.

She settled herself as though the reply might take an hour. "Don't let the bacon get cold, sir." Then out of the depths of a life-time's experience she produced—"Telegrams are rather awkward things, sir, in these parts. You can send 'em from Hatley—that's a mile and a half. But if you take my advice"—he knew he would—"you'll send it from St. Albans. That's a bit more than the two miles. But it'll go quicker. Have you ever seen St. Albans?"

"Never."

"Well, I tell you what. You have a good look round and then have something to eat at the 'Crosskeys.' A very nice clean house. My sister keeps it. She's younger than me and not so stout. Say you're staying with Mrs. Williams."

He could have hugged her for the sense she gave him of being handed round comfortably in the family.

"There won't be any difficulty about my staying on here for a week or two?"

"I'll try to make you comfortable."

"Can you put up a friend of mine?"

"There's two more rooms, just on the other side of yours. We don't get many visitors. But if your friend'll take things as they come."

"Of course he will." He pushed on with his breakfast.

The landlady had settled into a chair. Her hands lay in her lap.

"We've been wanting this rain," she said. "I hope there's some more to come."

"Not till I've been to St. Albans, please." Why was it so easy to talk to her? "I haven't got a coat, remember."

"Oh, we'll fit you out with something to keep you dry. And when you get on to the North Road you may pick up a motor-bus. It's only half a mile."

She produced a question from the depths. "I was wondering what you'd like for supper?" Her gold-rimmed spectacles twinkled invitation. "What *would* you like for supper?" they danced.

"Couldn't I have what you're having yourselves?" It seemed to him that there could be no finer food.

"That's only cold beef. There's potatoes, and cheese, and a red-currant tart, of course . . . and pickles," she added.

"But that will suit me perfectly." Perfectly wasn't the word.

The landlady sighed with relief. She had concealed her anxiety. He felt the exhilara-

tion that comes when the thing you long for happens—oh, how rarely!—to be the right thing also.

“Won’t you find it rather quiet here, sir?”

“That’s just what I wanted to find.” The delightful sense of their pleased with each other bore him on like a wave. “Just what I wanted . . . Mrs. Williams. My name,” he added, “is Boston.”

She absorbed it and pursued her thought.

“There’s a bowling green in the garden. The club plays Saturdays. But most evenings there’s some one wanting a game.”

“I’m afraid I don’t play.”

“Bless your heart, *that* don’t matter. Why, they’re glad to get me most times. And they’re a nice quiet lot. ’Tisn’t as though bowls was a noisy game—and yet I’ve heard say in the bar that it’s coming in again. You have a try, sir. Jim says it takes his mind off things. . . . You weren’t caught in the war, sir?”

“No, I tried.” It was true. Once in a frenzy at the very beginning when it seemed that the only thing to do was to fight; once in a frenzy towards the end when it seemed that the only thing to do was to get killed.

Still, they had been frenzies, and he was ashamed of hiding behind them. "But I didn't want to be, really."

"I should think not, indeed. I've had enough of them and their old wars. There's my boy. He's alive, that's something. But he isn't the same. Neither of his legs is any good, really. They took the knee-cap off one, and the other's that red and shiny it makes me cry to look at it. Then they gave him a job in the telephones where he could sit and wouldn't have to move his legs. I don't see that having a job where you don't move your legs because you can't is such a very great catch. But he's always in hospital again; and when he is out, you can hardly bear to look at his white face on the top of them crutches. And I'm sure you can't say it's done anyone a bit of good, can you, sir?"

"Not one bit," said Mr. Boston.

Probably Mr. Williams did not listen so sympathetically. Yet even he did not want his happiness disturbed. It was selfish, hateful; but what was the good? He had spent days and days in Thomson's study, in his own rooms, thinking about it. It wasn't thinking. It was just banging your head against a wall, until the pain made you numb, or sent you off

in a frenzy to try to get yourself killed. He mustn't be dragged into it again.

But he had mistaken the woman, or she had understood his unspoken thought.

"It don't bear thinking about. But if they try to catch us with another of their old wars. . . . But it's done before you can say 'Knife.' They're so cunning." She wagged her head, smiling wryly. "You can't catch 'em at it."

Who were "they"? Did they know, themselves? It was no use to argue that. Anyhow, she wasn't thinking of her own grief any more.

"I know a woman," she went on quietly, "that lost her only boy, three years ago now. She was a friend of mine, kept the grocer's and post office at Hatley. So lively, I would have felt dull beside her, if it hadn't been that she made you lively, too. Ran the Jumble; sang at the concerts; acted in the parson's Christmas play, and made you laugh, too; played the organ on Sunday. I don't know what she didn't do. Yet she was religious—real, good religion she had. Kind and generous, had a good word for everybody; played whist after Church on Sunday night. 'I don't believe in Sunday being solemn, Mrs.

Williams,' she used to say. And how she'd laugh !

"A little, tiny body too, with a gipsy face. She got more people into that church than Mr. Paternoster ever did, and he knew it. I'll say that for him, he got up a presentation to her, on the quiet, one Christmas. Everybody gave. They got over fifteen pounds. A dressing-case, it was. I put 'em up to it, because she once let out that she liked her dressing-table very neat. It was, too, just like a real lady's, except that it hadn't got any silver. The dressing-bag was full of silver, though.

"Well, that's the kind of woman she was. She looked about twenty-five the night they gave her the bag, a dark little slip of a thing. Yet she had a boy of fifteen. No, fourteen. That was the year before the war. That boy had her looks, gipsy-like. But he was quieter than she was. He took to his books, and went off to the grammar-school with a scholarship. He used to bicycle past here every Saturday, simply flying. At two o'clock. You could tell the time by him, almost. They were fond of each other, too fond if you ask me. Years ago I used to say to her—and she *was* young, then—'Why, you'll kiss him away, Mrs.

Kennington.' I don't think Mr. Kennington ever understood it, quite. I don't know that I did either.

"Well, the boy went out the moment he was eighteen, as an officer. They were making all the boys from the grammar-school officers then. I had an idea that made it easier for her, parting with him, him being an officer. He hadn't gone three weeks before the telegram came. She got the dots and the dashes straight in her heart, as you might say, from the machine behind the counter. It gives me a turn, just to think of it.

"That was a Wednesday. Well, she wasn't in church that Sunday; and there wasn't any music. She'd sent word to say she wasn't feeling well. And people who'd been into the shop said she'd been looking very poorly. But no one knew what had happened. Not a soul, not even her husband. She'd kept it all to herself.

"We were just getting into bed the Sunday night, maybe a bit earlier than usual. We hadn't played any whist, not having her. Just as I was putting out the light, I heard a tap-tap-tapping at the door. 'You go, Jim,' I said. And just while he was thinking about it, in the quiet I heard a tiny little voice, like

a child's, not like hers, calling: 'Mrs. Williams! Mrs. Williams!'

" 'No, I'll go,' I said, all of a sudden.

"Down I went. There in the dark I could see a slip of a girl with a shawl round her head. 'It's me,' she whispered. 'Em'ly Kennington.'

" 'Good Lord,' I said. 'And you ill too, and out at this time of night!' It was February. 'Come along in, my dear.'

" 'I wanted to speak to you, privately. It won't take long.' She looked round as much as to ask whether Jim was about.

" 'He's upstairs,' I said, 'and asleep by now, I'll warrant.'

"I put the lamp in this very room; she sat down on that very chair you're on now, sir. In front of the fire, what there was left of it.

"She put down her shawl and looked at me with those eyes of hers.

" 'You know what's happened,' she said.

"As soon as I could see her plain, I did.

" 'I haven't told anybody,' she said. 'I can't. If they came to me and said how sorry they were, I couldn't bear it. I haven't told Tom. The wire came on Wednesday. I took it myself.'

"I went over to her and put my arms round

her. I thought a good cry might do her good.

“ ‘It’s no use, Mrs. Williams,’ she said, and pushed me away.

“ ‘She began staring into the fire. Then, all of a sudden, she whipped round and looked me in the face.

“ ‘Do you believe in God, Mrs. Williams?’

“ ‘Of course, I do,’ I said, ‘and you do, too.’

“ ‘Really believe?’ she said, very quick.

“ ‘Why, yes,’ I said. ‘Don’t you, my dear?’

“ ‘No, I don’t,’ she said, very fierce like. ‘I can’t. I can’t. I’ve tried. The God I believed in couldn’t have done it, He couldn’t. Oh, I’ve tried, Mrs. Williams; I’ve tried three days and three nights, and I can’t. It’s awful. I can’t pray. I can’t sing. I shan’t ever go to church again.’

“ ‘I had it on the tip of my tongue to say it might be all for the best. But she was looking at me so hard, I couldn’t.

“ ‘I’ll have to go away,’ she said.

“ ‘Oh no, my dear,’ I said. ‘Why should you? Plenty of people go to church without believing so very much.’

“ ‘But I did, you see,’ she said, as quick as

a flash. 'I couldn't go any more.' And suddenly she began to cry.

"I went over. She let me put her arms round her this time. She felt as slim as a boy, shaking there. I kissed her, and I couldn't help thinking how like a boy she was.

" 'Well, whether you believe in God or whether you don't, it won't matter to me, my dear.'

"She stayed there with her head on my shoulder ever so long, and then she went away.

"I never knew what happened between her and her husband. But the week after he got a girl to look after the post office, and he bought the Half-mile Cottage. You'll pass it on your way. She went to live there. Next Sunday morning, before Communion, some one left a parcel at the Rectory. The parlourmaid unpacked it. It was the dressing-case and a letter. She told me. But what there was in the letter, she didn't know. Mr. Paternoster put it in his pocket.

"She never goes to church; hardly ever goes out at all. I go to see her once a week. Not that I don't enjoy myself, but she's so quiet. And she's more than ever like a lady. I get flustered almost at times."

The landlady paused and took a deep, sighing breath.

"What happened to the dressing-case?" asked Mr. Boston. The story had touched him intimately. And yet he wanted to know about the dressing-case; what colour it was, even, and how many bottles it contained.

"They made her take it back," said Mrs. Williams shortly.

The rain was still falling gently, murmuring upon the roof. Out of the window he could see a man and a boy dismounting barrels from a red-wheeled dray. Under their bonnets of sacking they worked with effort but with ease, as though yielding like reeds to the soft flow of time. They stood on either side of the cart-tail, holding a hogshead poised at the top of the strong ladder; the whole weight of each man's body massed simply into one outstretched arm. They let the barrel run, and relaxed like young trees when the wind sinks. The hogshead crunched the wet gravel as they swiftly trundled it along. A vapoury steam rose from the horses' bronzen flanks. There was the sharp chinking of shining bits.

"That's a very interesting story, Mrs.

Williams." He slowly stirred his last cup of tea, his head bowed over it.

She let the memory sink back into the depths again.

"I don't think there's much chance of this rain holding over," she said. "I think we're in for a day's good drizzle. But it won't come to anything more, not before nightfall . . . I'll get you that coat."

"I can't. I can't," echoed in Mr. Boston's head. It chimed with the clinking of the horses' tossing heads; it was beautiful.

The landlady entered with a long, black oilskin. "Nothing much'll get through this," she said, and laughed. "Put it on."

It enfolded him generously. His slender nose peered out of a stiff, upstanding collar, like a pale unfledged bird out of a nest. He glanced at his outstretched arms; only the fingers showed.

"I don't think a straw-hat will quite go with this," he said.

Laughter slowly bubbled up from the depths. "You're not so tall as my boy. But it'll keep you dry. That's the main thing, isn't it?"

She pulled the coat about upon him. He stood helpless while she took the collar in

her two hands and turned it down, revealing his face again. With the same quick gesture she took each arm and turned up the cuffs.

"There you are, sir." She patted the coat behind. "Now for a hat." She hustled out of the room again.

He felt that he was being dressed like a doll, and enjoyed it.

"The very thing." With her two hands again she put a grey cloth deer-stalker on his head, and turned him to face the mantel mirror. He wondered at himself, then caught the reflection of her smiling eyes.

"I shouldn't know myself," he said, smiling too.

He said good morning to the draymen as he passed, and was surprised that they were not as surprised as he was. He walked with a different step along the puddled road. It was as though his body, or his coat, had taken charge of him. He could almost have stamped in the puddles. As it was, he took no pains to avoid them. The very squelching of the sandy mud was pleasant.

His coat disguised him ; more, it positively hid him. It didn't matter what he did. "The philosophy of clothes," he murmured,

plunging his hands deep into the rough woollen pockets.

In the distance to his right a church spire rose mistily. Was that the church? Then suddenly, as he passed a copse, a little house with a green iron veranda appeared. Was that the cottage? Dark-red rambler roses climbed the veranda pillars. There was a long deck-chair stretched out by the door. In the windows above pale yellow curtains. No, you would hardly call that a cottage, and yet. . . . He would have liked to look back.

A hundred yards beyond was a white signpost. "Hatley $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles. St. Albans 2 miles." He walked along the St. Albans road.

It all proved, he said to himself, that the thing to do was not to worry. Or was it that he had had a stroke of amazing good fortune? Anyhow, if it were, it was his business to stay on at the "Wheatsheaf." The coat and hat were not a dream. Far from it. He would like to have Mrs. Williams to talk to him every day; it was like being put out into the sun. To learn all the stories of all the people, to play bowls on Saturdays and whist on Sundays, to know that country-side as well as he knew the way from Tottenham

Court Road to Cadogan Square. A little flame of ambition kindled and danced. What was it Chateaubriand said? "Perhaps I am the only person who knows that these people ever existed." Something like that. To lose himself completely in faithfully following a thing that was real. After all, why not? He hadn't any genius, any talent even—it was no use humbugging himself—but he was different from most people. Not that he saw things. If he had been used to seeing things, the draymen and the barrel and the horses would not have struck him with that queer astonishing perfection, like a waking dream, like those other pictures he had meant to think about. Perhaps that was the explanation. Simply that he did not see things save on most rare occasions, and then the vision haunted him. Perhaps life was all like that really, if only he had the eyes to see.

No, but seriously; he had a way of feeling things. He had never met it in anyone else save his mother. It cut him off from people, from that girl last night for instance. He hurried his thought away; he could not bear to think about her, not yet, at all events. That was queer also. A beginning of pain warned him. But this way of feeling things

that he had—perhaps it was something positive, a possession, even a gift, not a weakness only. And he was fortunate, after all. He had four pounds a week of his own. How many people had that? Fortunate! Why, he was one in a thousand. Curious that he had never thought of it exactly in this simple way before! If there was anything in this idea he could put it to the test. He could give years to being the patient chronicler of Hatley.

The golden flame danced in his heart. It was a good thing to be hidden behind that massive oilskin. So strange a feeling could not but be visible. A clergyman, with white, bushy eyebrows, toothbrush eyebrows, nodded as he cycled slowly past. Could that be Mr. Paternoster?

He pushed up the hill into the town, through a stream of descending schoolchildren. On the horizon the soft grey wastes of sky seemed to be breaking timidly into palest blue. Hot and blown with the weight of his coat, the drops falling fast from his hat on to his shoulders, he kept steadily on to the post office. To his telegram to Bettington he added "Don't disappoint me." He also sent one to Mr. Thomson. "*Sorry impossible*

continue please accept this as resignation."

Then, feeling that this would be his last expense on telegrams for many a day, with a smouldering excitement at heart, he went to look for a barber and buy a collar before making his way to the "Crosskeys."

CHAPTER IV

BETTINGTON

"Alas! I shall never be a Tolstoyan. In women I love beauty above all things, and in the history of mankind culture expressed in carpets, spring carriages and keenness of wit. Ach! To make haste and become an old man and sit at a big table!"—*Anton Tchekhov.*

WHEN Bettington received Mr. Boston's telegram he was writing his weekly page of literary gossip for *Woman and Child*. Literary gossip for women and children did not come easy to him. Nothing did, but this was by far the hardest of all; for he had a peculiar conscience. His editor, pleased with the unfailing regularity and neatness of his manuscript, was yet in two minds about him. He told him that his page lacked "warmth." And Bettington knew it. He also was in two minds. The one said sternly, menacingly, that he must give it up; the other whispered that to hold on was the only way out. For Bettington was

a man of dreams. He dreamed of independence, of a remote cottage in the country, of an ideal love, of patient, undisturbed, self-satisfying work at—something or other. It didn't matter what you did, he thought, if your heart was in it and it was not shoddy ; and it seemed to him that in the cottage of his desire, with the independence he craved, he could put his heart into anything.

He brought his ideal to earth ; he fixed his goal at a thousand pounds. That was something solid behind which he could hide all the problems of the future. With the thousand pounds—seventy pounds a year if he invested it circumspectly—he could breathe and think. Even now, in these times, he could live on a pound a week at a pinch. For the last two summers he had made the experiment, most scrupulously. Four years of the war, too, miraculously without a scratch, had brought him down to bedrock in the matter of luxury. The one little bodily worry the war had left him with, a shortness of breath that came of being gassed, would be put right in the country. Everything pointed to the goal. A thousand pounds !

It was a slow business. Last year he had

managed to put a bare thirty pounds away. He could not live in London on less than five pounds a week, and more often than not, it was six. He was frugal enough. But the trouble was that the cottage seemed so far away that he had to bring it nearer. He was always buying things for his after-life; for that gave him a sense of half-living it already. And the things he bought had to be of a piece with his ideal; there must be no shoddy in them. Although he waited carefully for his chances, they were never cheap. He bought odd things—a pair of thick linen sheets, a London-made bracket clock, a Persian rug with a border of china blue. The clock had been very troublesome; but Friedlander, the watchmaker who had sold it him, had let him pay in instalments because he wanted him to have it. For Bettington had listened with undivided attention while he described the merits of a fine old London movement, and at the end Friedlander had said that he must have it. They would manage it somehow.

It had been managed. But Bettington had saved nothing for six months. Still, he had the joy of listening to the far-off, silvery chime while he worked. It had been worth

it. The sound seemed to be wafted straight from the ideal country, unsullied, unbroken. The first night he had listened to it in the stillness of his room, the magical, wistful, silver note had taken his breath away and he had cried out for joy. He was a sentimentalist.

In return for this beatitude he had given Friedlander a huge volume on "Clocks" which he had seen in the editor's room at *Woman and Child*. The moment he saw it he thought "The very thing for Friedlander." And he had spent two days in composing an unpaid article on "Clock Collecting" in return for the book. In some ways, he afterwards thought, he had been rash, for the little, hollow-chested, hook-nosed man had ever since been putting away his best bargains for him. Bettington knew he would never have such chances again. But Friedlander's kindness was a drain, even though it had brought him an astonishing set of French Regency knives and forks with silver dolphins for handles, two slender candlesticks in pale yellow Battersea enamel and an ivory box with the Temptation of Saint Anthony stained upon it.

Sometimes Bettington wondered vaguely

whether he was not being false to his own ideal. What had these exquisite things to do with it, or him? Miss Mortimer had counted for something in this curious sublimation of his purpose. Her little cry of delight when she came to his rooms after a purchase, her manner of handling it like gossamer in her childish fingers, thrilled him as though an angel had discovered some hidden strand of beauty in him and said that it was good. She had suddenly cupped her chin in her hands at the first hearing of the clock chime and whispered, "O-o-oh, Bett, but it's wonderful . . . magical," and the sound of her voice had been to him more exquisite even than the bell. He had felt a lump in his throat, he had wanted to cry, "Darling, but it's *ours*." That was impossible, out of the question. Felicia was not in love with him, nor he with Felicia. Everything depended on her remaining free. She had struggled hard for her freedom with her people—vague, insentient ogres they appeared to him, when she spoke of them—and he quite agreed with her that it would be fatal if she were to fall in love.

Still, she had helped to form in him this passion for things exquisite; but even more

it seemed to come by some irresistible logic of his own ideal. This absolutely simple, completely independent life of his dream seemed to refuse all other settings. "Give me the best, the finest, the most delicate, the most beautiful," it said. And that was strange, for he was clumsy—clumsy in shape, his head too large, his black hair wiry and rebellious, his fingers knotted and bony, his wrists red, his jackets always too short in the sleeves and hanging slightly awry at the collar. Clumsy too in thought and speech, as though he were always making violent, ineffectual grabs at some shadowy and elusive meaning. His long words seemed like butterfly-nets, suddenly clapped on to an empty space of ground; he lifted them with timid, nervous solemnity, and there was nothing there. "You see what I mean?" he added pathetically; and he wondered despairingly what he had meant.

The passion for exquisiteness which had taken shape in him was like a strange genie. It was as though he had first made, with his goal of a thousand pounds, a stout brass bottle, a plain and serviceable container for his vague, unformed dreams, and lo! when he lifted the lid a little way, out of it there

rose a tiny fairy, a being of beauty whom he had never known before, a spirit like a dancing star who led him—far away from his cottage and his independence, he blackly thought when he surveyed the havoc wrought in his bank balance by the clock and the carpet—to something without which his cottage and his independence would be bodies without a soul, he felt thrillingly when he heard Felicia's voice, "It would be wicked to walk on it in your shoes, Bett, simply wicked," and she traced the pattern of the carpet with her foot.

Into this turmoil of delights and demurs had come the godsent offer of the weekly page in *Woman and Child*. Four mortal guineas a week over and above the rest! something that put itself away automatically and became in five years one thousand pounds. In five years? Less than that. And Bettington began a series of elaborate calculations to find how quickly four guineas a week at compound interest would produce a thousand pounds. It had occupied him on and off ever since he began the work at the beginning of the year, and he had never reached a completely convincing result. There was a theorem or something—some

special device—for doing a sum like that. So much he knew, but he did not know the theorem.

He had never completely satisfied his editor, or himself. "Warmth" meant ecstatic adjectives applied to fashionable novelists, and he could not bring himself to it. The chance that he always went to tea with Boston on the day before he had to write his page made it peculiarly impossible. Not that they talked very much about books—Boston did not anyhow—but there was a tonic atmosphere in their spasmodic conversation. Boston was not a cynic. Bettington hated cynicism; it withered him. He was despondent and hopeless, of course, but you felt that it came from his having tried so hard to find something to hope for. Something had happened to Boston, he decided, something bad; against it Boston was putting up a fight in secret, a slow unending fight that called for an unrelenting discipline, and he seemed never to win. He was sorry, deeply sorry for Boston; he wanted to say—if only once, if only a word—something that was intimate and full of sympathy. But clumsiness or shyness held his tongue. More than this he admired Boston; partly

for the power he had of holding tenaciously to the thread of a subject, his way of saying, every now and then, "But what you said just now was very interesting . . . I think there must be something in it . . ." Chiefly for the sense Boston gave him that he must have the truth at all costs.

But it was impossible to write "warm" literary notes after that, even if he had found it in himself. So he had evolved a precarious compromise. He wrote admiringly only of writers he did admire—though his taste was generous and naïve, there were not many of them—and tried to introduce the warmth by giving all the details of their domestic lives that he could scrape together. He felt that they must hate him for it; he would have liked to have the chance of explaining his dilemma to them. One evening he had by chance met Bernard Shaw at a reception. Shaw had said, "You write the notes in *Woman and Child*, don't you?" He had turned crimson. Had he not written only last week of Shaw's swimming every morning in the Royal Automobile Club baths and compared it with a like habit of Walter Sickert's? He began to stammer his excuses. Shaw simply said, "Very hard thing to do

—notes like that. An evening like this must be a godsend to you. I dare say that's why they were invented. But you do your notes very well, too well." Bettington felt that even his wrists were blushing; and in his confusion the opportunity of explaining disappeared for ever. Who was he to be talking to Shaw? He sidled away like a crab and stood in a corner. Afterwards the evening had not seemed quite real and he had neglected his opportunities of accumulating gossip. He was wondering what "Too well" really meant. You never knew with a man like Shaw.

But after that encounter the references in his notes to Shaw at least did not lack "warmth." He told Felicia what Shaw had said, but not Boston; Boston would think him childish. This enforced repression on Sunday took revenge on Monday; he had great difficulty in keeping Shaw out of his notes. He was wrestling with this King Charles's Head when Boston's telegram arrived.

It was astonishing, bewildering; he could scarcely believe his eyes. It was as though Boston, who had never said an intimate word to him in their whole acquaintance,

had suddenly taken his arm. Then he thought that something terrible had happened ; Boston had caught pneumonia. But if he had he would have said so. He read the telegram again and again. "*Come yourself if you possibly can ideal place don't disappoint me Boston.*"

"It's extraordinary," he said.

There was no time to lose. He hurriedly changed his coat, brushed back his stiff hair with his hands and started wildly for the door. The clock began to chime far away, recalling something to his mind. Those notes ! He plunged back into his chair, and held his head in his hands, as though he would squeeze something out of it, as from a tube, on to the paper. After a moment he put the telegram face downwards under the pewter inkpot, solid as a pyramid. Then in a fit of inspiration he picked up a sheet with a rejected paragraph on Shaw, wrote *Stet* boldly across the top, and inserted at the beginning :

"So many people who find what Shaw has to say irresponsible or even detestable are nevertheless fascinated by him. They assure you that they don't take him seriously, but they read wherever they see his name—this paragraph, for instance. The reason is

that he is become for them a kind of secret adventure. They are too old to smoke blotting-paper in the coal-cellar ; they chase after Shaw instead. He satisfies their desire for the unexpected and ungovernable. The desire is typical of the age . . .”

That would do. With the sheets in his hand he started off again. Again he paused, recalling something, at the door. Felicia was coming to tea. He must telephone to her from the post office, that was all. He dashed back to the table and thrust the telegram into his pocket, and hurried out to Fetter Lane.

The office boy at *Woman and Child* was too quick for him. As he pushed his manuscript through the pigeon-hole in the lobby and turned tumultuously to the street, the whole door opened, pigeon-hole and all. “Mr. Bettington . . . sir,” the boy screamed. Bettington hesitated, cursed himself for his hesitation. The boy ran up. “Mr. Hone would like to see you for a moment. He’s disengaged now.” He held out the manuscript. “Will you take this up with you, sir.”

Bettington went up the stairs three at a time ; his feet clattered against the iron

tread-guards. What a fool to let himself be caught! He was trapped in a great bag of brown linoleum. He tapped at the door, himself surprised at the contrast between the noise of his feet on the stairs and his almost inaudible knocking.

"Morning, Bettington." Hone's spectacles looked very querulous; Bettington felt uneasy for no cause. "Halliday's just wired to say he's got 'flu. I must have something on the Dog Show for this week."

Bettington stared. "But I don't know anything about dogs," he murmured.

"Neither do I. . . . But it's not so bad as all that. You don't have to go and look at the — things"—nothing was more bloodless than Hone's expletives—"he's sending along his notes." Hone swung round in his chair and held out a telegram. Another telegram! Was it all mad, after all? "All you have to do," said Hone, "is to write them up. I must have it by five. You'd better get hold of a Dog-Encyclopædia. These women know all about the damned things. They would, the —." Hone was cheered up by his joke. Bettington smiled wanly. "Never refuse a job"—the old maxim of the journalist pounded in his head.

"Very well," he said mechanically. "I'll do my best."

"Good man. Five o'clock."

"After that," said Bettington firmly, "I'm going to take a week's holiday."

It was Hone's turn to smile.

"No, I mean it. I'm going into the country for a week to-night, if you don't mind."

"All right. See you on Monday. Don't forget. Five o'clock latest."

Bettington went moodily down the stairs. Dog-Encyclopædia! He had touched bottom with a vengeance. Half-past one! He couldn't possibly do Boston's things now. He stood at the street door, thinking. And now he had forgotten those notes. He stumped up to Hone's again.

"Special messenger. They ought to be here by now," said Hone, not looking up. "Get 'em downstairs as soon as they come."

As he wandered downstairs, wondering how long he would have to wait, a ray of light shot across his gloom. He would get Felicia to go with him to Boston's. She would not mind packing the things, while he wrote about the dogs in Boston's sitting-room. Even though she didn't like Boston, she would do it for him.

"I'm waiting for a letter by special messenger to Mr. Hone, from Mr. Halliday. Keep it for me. I'm just going to the post office."

"Very good, sir," piped the boy.

Felicia first, then Boston, he decided as he entered the post office. There was an anxious pause at the telephone while some one looked for Miss Mortimer, long enough for his last, desperate, brilliant plan to crash, to dissolve into dust; long enough for him to recover and ask himself amazedly why he was so convinced that Boston's affair was terribly urgent. Why couldn't it wait till to-morrow? Steps reverberated in a remote hollow cavern at the end of the telephone. Why was he so anxious to get Boston's business done? He was, anyhow.

Felicia's small, cool voice touched him like a thread of gold, almost tickled him into a smile.

"Is that you, Felicia?" His relief was audible.

"Why, what's the matter, Bett?"

What *was* the matter? He began a breathless, complicated explanation. "... and I've got to find a Dog-Encyclopædia."

"But *I* haven't got one." He could not help laughing.

"No, but, Felicia . . . it's serious. . . ."

"It always *is*, Bett." Surely she was laughing too? And yet he felt she was hurt with him for taking all this trouble over Boston. Why?

"You see, Felicia," he began again, "he hasn't got anyone else. . . . Besides, it's the only thing he's ever asked me to do," he pleaded. How difficult simple things were!

Silence.

Then real, unmistakable laughter.

"You didn't think I wasn't going to come?"

"No—o."

"You did. I can hear."

"Well, I thought perhaps you might have something to do."

"Of course I have. But I'd give up anything to break into Mr. Boston's rooms. Don't you *see* how exciting it is? Like Madame Bluebeard. And to pack his clothes! Why is it, Bett, that packing one's own clothes is such a terrible ordeal, while packing some one else's is heavenly?"

"I've never thought of it," he said wonderingly.

"Perhaps you might have the answer ready by lunch-time. . . . We are going to

lunch together, aren't we? I'll bring my little crowbar."

"It's awfully good of you, Felicia."

"Bett! Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"Please don't say things like that. It makes me feel ashamed. It's not awfully good of me. If I were to ask you to do it, you would, wouldn't you?"

"Of course."

"Well, then. . . . Must you really do those dogs? I hate that Hone. . . . Listen!"
And then a very distinct voice recited:

"Who'll force the door?"

I, said dear Bett,

With my little *gimlet*,

I'll force the door.

"Who'll pack his shirts?"

I, said Felishu,

With paper of tissue,

I'll pack his shirts.

I think Felishu's rather a nice change, don't you? But I'm keeping you off the dogs. Where shall we meet? Don't forget your dark lantern."

She would be at the Clifford's Inn restaurant for lunch in half an hour. "Good-bye, Bett." Why was she always laughing at him?

He went to a partition and wrote his telegram:—

“ Boston Wheatsheaf Caulfield sending things this afternoon will come to-night or to-morrow morning if any way possible, Bettington.”

It was possible. He had arranged it with Hone ten minutes ago. Why had he put that? Nevertheless, he left the words and went back to *Woman and Child*.

No, the letter had not come.

“ Well, I’m going to have lunch at Clifford’s Inn. I’ll be there in twenty minutes. Bring it along and I’ll give you sixpence.”

“ Thank you, sir.”

Now for this Dog-Encyclopædia. He hadn’t time to go to the British Museum ; and if he had he couldn’t take the book away. He saw himself staggering under a gigantic “ Post Office Directory.” Something simpler than that. Of course, there must be a dog-news-paper. He asked at the crowded bookstall in the Strand:

“ Have you got anything on dogs ? ”

The man looked at Bettington’s earnest face.

“ What kind of dogs ? ”

"Oh, ordinary dogs . . . the things you see about." He waved his hand up the street.

"The things with muzzles?"

Bettington looked the man in the face; he was laughing. Of course, it was comic.

"You wouldn't laugh if you had to write about them," he said reproachfully.

The man was helpful. "There's the *Dog World*, the *Dog Fancier*"--he put them before Bettington as he spoke--"there's the *Bull-Terrier*, but we don't stock it. And there's"--he turned and scanned the rack behind him--"a handbook on dogs. Paper-covered thing. One and six, used to be a bob. Just wait a moment." He swept up a dozen coins from the papers in front of him, threw them chinking into the till, put sixpence change into an outstretched hand, and with the same movement dived under the counter. Bettington almost doubted whether he would come up again.

He did not, for two or three minutes. His partner cast impatient glances into the depths.

Then he came to the surface, knocking the dust off a battered book in dingy red.

"There's the outfit," he said. "Let you

have it for a bob. Shop-soiled. Tell you everything about 'em—fire-dogs, as well."

"You've saved my life," said Bettington with a sudden smile. He paid and walked away. There was an index, too.

As he picked his way to a corner of the empty restaurant he felt he knew why Felicia had laughed. He could have laughed himself. The great sheet of cloud which had muffled the day had broken into masses of puffed and shining cotton-wool, with twinkling blue between. Continually the sun shot golden, mote-filled beams even into that low room. And Felicia would be there any minute now.

The office-boy brought the letter to the table, and stood grinning.

Bettington opened, and looked vacantly at the boy

"Oh . . . your sixpence? "

"That's it, sir." He departed grinning. The sun caught two absurd buttons on his jacket tails.

She was there, in front of him, holding out her hand, as though she might draw it away if he did not catch it immediately.

Bettington knew Boston's charwoman. The empty bed in the morning had given her

"a fair fright"; and why hadn't he sent his telegram to her? She led them grudgingly up the stairs.

"You haven't shown Mrs. Beale the telegram," said Felicia. They paused on the landing.

"You read it, miss . . . my eyes"

Felicia read it. "You see, Mrs. Beale, Mr. Boston wants Mr. Bettington to take the things himself; he didn't want to give you the trouble of packing them and then having to find Mr. Bettington. As Mr. Bettington was going there, it was much simpler."

Partly mollified, the charwoman opened the door. "I'll keep the key, if you *don't* mind, miss."

"How did you know I was going?" said Bettington, closing the door.

"Of course you're going, after that telegram," she said quickly. "I wonder why we have to whisper, just as if we were really burglars." She opened the door of the bedroom a few inches. Bettington looked over her head, then down at the nape of her neck. If he dared just to touch it, with his little finger! The blind-cord tapped lazily against the window-pane. The wind that lifted it stirred also some threads of brown hair,

golden against the light, that veiled her ear. A spell was on the room.

"I imagine all the things are in that chest of drawers," he said in a voice not his own.

She slipped back into the passage. "Let me see the other rooms first." Her voice also was more severe ; but he did not notice it. She opened the door of the sitting-room wide and walked boldly in.

There was the gate-leg table and the black typewriter case ; the two wooden arm-chairs, one with brown corduroy cushions, where Boston listened, the other with grey-blue cretonne, where Bettington talked ; the grey cord carpet ; the too shiny bureau, with Durer's "Melancolia" on the wall beside ; a red kettle-holder by the mantel-piece ; a faintly tinted portrait of a girl above, with a weight of light-brown hair looped low on her neck.

"But where is *he*, Bett ? " she whispered. "How strange it is, coming into some one's rooms like this. Let's open a window."

He watched her push it open. "Here, let me," he said, too late. There was the red Furniture Depository at the end of the long, mottled wall of the board-school.

"I don't think I should have *chosen* this place to live in," she said.

"He's a queer chap." He drew a chair up to the table and spread out Halliday's notes.

"Oh, Lord," he said, and started up again. "I've forgotten to bring any paper."

"Surely he'll have some somewhere," she said from her place by the window, without turning round.

Bettington looked despondently into some bookshelves.

"You get on with your old notes," she said. "I'll find the paper. If I can't, I'll run out and get some."

"Thanks awfully . . . I haven't got much time."

She went to the Sheraton bureau. It was locked, of course. She tiptoed along the hearthrug, not to disturb Bettington, and looked for the key on the mantel-piece; she always kept her own there. It was like playing hunt the thimble in a room where some one was sleeping. She peered round the edge of the hanging mirror. There it was. She felt that she shared a secret.

She opened the desk. A pad of paper lay neatly in the centre of a red blotter. She

slipped it on the table to Bettington's hand. He looked vaguely up. "Perfect," he murmured, intent on his notes.

"I'll try to find you some blotting paper," she whispered, so that he did not hear.

She went back to the bureau. Her heart began to thump, as she silently opened the drawer beneath the desk. There were three boxes, two of cardboard, one of polished wood in the middle. She opened the wooden one; it was empty. She half lifted the lid of one in cardboard, and saw a bundle of faded grey gloves tied with mauve ribbon. She half lifted the lid of the third. A quaint little case in tartan, an oval mirror in mother-of-pearl, the blood-red glint of garnets in cotton wool.

Bettington pulled his chair nearer to the table. It creaked. She started; she nearly cried aloud. She closed the box with fumbling desperation and locked the drawer. He had not looked up.

"I'll go and put the things together." Her voice was far off and faint.

"Right-o! I don't think this will take me so long, after all," he said cheerfully.

She sat down on the bed in the bedroom; she had escaped from a forbidden chamber

where she had entered and stirred a ghost. She ought to have told Bettington and shared it ; but she could not have done it. She almost winced at the thought of those boxes being exposed.

The blind-cord lapped at the window-pane. She sent the blind clattering up. Then all was still again, but differently still.

She began to put the shirts out on the bed. On the wall at the bed-foot she saw for the first time a photograph of a woman. It was the woman who was in the sitting-room ; the same weight of hair looped low on the neck. But now she wore a high collar, with a tiny linen ruff, pierced by an arrow-brooch. A deep fringe of hair covered her forehead, and even now her eyelashes looked as though tears were hiding behind them. She was very young, perhaps younger than Felicia herself. Twenty-two ?

Felicia felt she ought to ask to be forgiven for what she was doing in that room. She must do what she had to do with a delicate reserve, as though she were not doing it herself, or for herself ; she must give place to that woman, do intimate things without intimacy.

She began to count the handkerchiefs.

Whenever she bent down, she was being gently watched. All the handkerchiefs bore D. H. B. printed diagonally across the corner. What did D. H. stand for? Not "David Henry," she thought, glancing up at the watcher.

Then she felt that she was arranging these things and putting them away for a long time, for ever. She was tying them up with mauve ribbon and storing them in a place where they would slowly fade and yellow, as the handkerchiefs in that drawer had faded. The thought, and the silent room, and the unmoving gaze of the watcher saddened her. She longed for the woman to speak, for some one to speak a comfortable word to her. She thought of Bettington sitting remote and separate, engrossed and motionless, in the other room, almost with bitterness.

How dead these clothes were, as she surveyed them, carefully piled on the bed. Husks of living things that could not be made real, except by some ghostly essence which escaped her. She was becalmed and stagnant in a strange world of lifeless memories. Perhaps all this was warm in some one's mind, living and breathing there. In Boston's mind perhaps. Or perhaps they

were in his mind as they were in hers now, inert and inviolable. Perhaps some people's lives were really dead. She shivered at her own fancy.

She must comfort herself, by herself, anyhow; and she must put the things away. She took a suit-case from the end of the bed and packed the clothes in it hurriedly, with the same desperation she had felt before when she fumbled with the boxes. She must get out of this labyrinth of dead life; she did not belong to it.

She looked up with a start; some one was standing in the doorway, staring down at her. It was only Bettington.

"How you did frighten me!" she said. "Why ever did you come so quietly?"

"I'm terribly sorry. I didn't know I did. It's the matting."

"I don't like being in empty rooms—other people's empty rooms," she said. For a moment she felt that he had come to spy on her; then, as she looked at his distressed face, she repented the thought and despised herself.

"I only came to say that I've nearly finished. I'm so sorry," he said again. "I didn't think."

She laughed to reassure him, for he looked as though he had broken a china figure. "*Nearly* finished! I've quite finished." She closed the lid of the suit-case. "I'll leave you to fasten it."

He bent down to snap the clips. "I shall have finished in ten minutes; it was easier than I thought."

"Ah! I see what you came for, Bett."

He looked at her wonderingly. Yes, she loved that crooked, hesitating, familiar smile. "You came to warn me; I'm to have tea ready by the time you've led the last dog home," she said.

"Really," he protested, "I never thought of it."

"Well, I think you ought to have done."

It was in Bettington's nature that he should have wondered for a moment how she meant her words. He had grown used to being caught in two minds by her. It happened with no one else; and the thrill of finding unexpectedly that the second and delightful choice was always the right one was something new, inexhaustibly new, in his life. Her slipping away, too, as she slipped away now, before he had quite chosen, was a bewildering enchantment; and her calling, from out

of his reach, as she called from the kitchen now, "You're too simple for this world, Bett, really," was to him as much a part of her as the withholding gesture when she gave him her hand. Those very words were part of her, also. He went back to his table.

The kitchen vaguely reminded her of a doll's house. It was the row of shining golden canisters. You never had them in real kitchens. She took down the SAGO; no one ever really had sago. She was quite right; it was filled with ends of string. She pictured some one going out to buy that range of canisters—perhaps he came home with them all in his arms—and for the first time she felt at ease in Mr. Boston's rooms.

She spread a napkin over the corner of the kitchen table, set two cups—it was curious how cups that would be dull if they were hers were charming in this other kitchen—discovered some biscuits in the TAPIOCA, a pot of marmalade in the cupboard, and waited.

"That's all over, thank God!" Bettington sat down heavily on a kitchen chair. She hesitated, waiting in vain for some acknowledgment of her preparations. This taking of things for granted! she thought as she turned away to fill the teapot, she would

never, never become accustomed to it; it was a kind of numbness, a kind of death.

She put the teapot on the table. He was drumming with his fingers, preoccupied, and she was a silent serving-maid. Yet it was hardly like him to ignore her; he was generally aware of her in a perplexed, admiring way of his own. He was worrying about something.

"What is it, Bett?" she said as she poured out the tea. His eyes were blindly watching her hand.

He woke out of his reverie and smiled.

"Why, what do you mean?"

"What's worrying you?"

"Am I worrying?"

"What are you thinking about, then?"

"Oh . . . I was thinking . . . whether I ought to go and see him."

"Why, of course you must. I thought it was all settled. You're going this afternoon."

"But . . . I don't know when I shall be able to get another week off."

"What does that matter? You've got this week off, specially in order to go."

"I didn't say definitely I was coming, in my wire."

"You can't possibly get out of it."

"But we'd planned, you remember . . ."

Felicia remembered perfectly; she had been waiting to see what he would do. They were to have gone together on his first holiday in the year. She wanted to see whether she also could live on a pound a week.

"Couldn't you come, too?" he said doubtfully.

"I'm afraid Mr. Boston doesn't like me."

"But he's never seen you." There was not much conviction in his voice. "Only that one evening," he said.

"And he's never shown the faintest desire to see me since, Bett."

"But he never wanted to see me even. If I hadn't persisted . . ."

"You think I might persist as well. He might learn to tolerate me," she laughed; but Boston's indifference had always vexed her, and it vexed her now.

"I think he's changed. He wouldn't have sent that telegram, unless . . ." he argued. Felicia was half convinced. That telegram was certainly the best thing she had heard about Boston. Before she had always resented Bettington's fidelity; she said to herself (though never to him) that he had no

right to let himself be imposed on. He had learned by experience that it did not do to report Boston's conversations to her. At first she had criticised them as seriously as she could. Afterwards, as soon as he began, she would stop him with, "I'd rather not know what Mr. Boston thinks; it's sure to be depressing."

"You must go yourself, anyhow," said Felicia. "I don't see very well how I can." Yet she wanted him to press her. Instead he seemed to accept her verdict.

"Do you mind?" he said.

"Of course I do," she said promptly.

He pondered this gloomily. Then he said, "I tell you what, Felicia. I'll go this evening and I'll tell him you're coming to-morrow."

"But I don't think I want to go."

"Oh . . . don't you? I thought you did, somehow."

"Which do *you* want me to do?"

"I want you . . ." He hesitated. "To come," he said resolutely.

Felicia knew precisely what his hesitation meant, but she ignored it. She was curious to see.

"Very well," she said. "I'll come. But you must promise to let me know if you see

he doesn't like the idea. If I don't hear by lunch time to-morrow I shall come."

"So that's settled." A weight was off his mind.

"Don't you think that tea in empty houses always tastes different?" she said.

"I've never thought of it, you know."

"You don't think of a great many things, do you, Bett?" She went over to the tap and began to rinse the cups. He sat thinking.

"I don't think of the same kind of things," he said finally.

"Not cheerful little soap-bubbles of thoughts like mine," she said, smiling. "Profound, solid, gloomy ones like Mr. Boston's."

"No, I don't mean that." He awoke to what she was doing and started up. "Can't I help you?"

"It's done now." Nevertheless he took the cloth from her and dried the remaining cup, very slowly and carefully.

"I should *love* to hear you two together," said Felicia, smiling thoughtfully.

CHAPTER V

BETTINGTON'S ARRIVAL

“ Hommes bien miserables et escervelez, qui taschent d'estre pires qu'ils ne peuvent.”—*Montaigne*.

WHEN he turned back from St. Albans Boston's enthusiasm had begun to evaporate ; he began to repent his telegram. He had been so excited and certain of himself in the morning, convinced that he had found a resting-place. He had left the inn feeling that he belonged there ; now he felt that he would be entering a strange house on his return.

The difficulties of Bettington's coming rose before him. It was not to be expected that Mrs. Williams would receive his friend as himself, and he felt a faint twinge of jealousy at the thought that she might. If he were alone he might be absorbed again ; he and Bettington together would make a little world of their own. A world of their own ! If it

were a real world, it would not matter. But what had Bettington and he to do with each other really. He did not acknowledge him ; he wanted to be left alone. He was quite willing, eager, to admit that he was incapable of friendship, unworthy of it even. He wasn't fit to have a friend, and that was why he had never had one. Well, he was made in that fashion. He ought to accept it.

But the thing was done. Whatever happened he must not let Bettington down. That was the all-important thing. He had called to him ; he must appear to be the man that called. To let Bettington see that he had cooled, had frozen again—that was impossible, not to be thought of, unforgivable. Whatever he did, he must not do that. The burden of this necessity was intolerable, but he must bear it.

Then he wondered whether by trying to be what Bettington would expect to find him he might by some simple miracle become that man. He thought of himself as gentle and wise, without any hatred of life, having put off all evil pride and put on a tenderness that he longed to wear, no longer frightened or dismayed, but good. Yes, good. It was childish ; but he did not care. There was

childishness in him, hungering to be satisfied. He even meant good as children meant it. He wanted to be made good, as his mother had been made good. That was what Bettington would come expecting him to be; his message had meant that, no less.

Suddenly he felt overwhelmingly, extravagantly grateful to Bettington for expecting it of him. With so little cause! What had he ever done or said to him that he should believe it possible? He had let Bettington come to see him as though he were granting a privilege; and he had come faithfully, never failing, never letting it appear by a word or a gesture that he expected a return, never showing for an instant that it was he who was granting the privilege, not Boston. If he had, he would not have understood. His corrupt self-engrossment—it was horrible! Why, though he knew Bettington wanted him to see his rooms, though he knew that Bettington felt they contained something of himself that he would never understand without having seen them, he had always refused to go. He had always refused to meet Miss Mortimer, and how that must have hurt Bettington. Hurt him! It had probably poisoned, yes, faintly poisoned, her friendship

with him. Boston winced as though a needle had been thrust into his heart. Why, in the name of God, had he not seen these things before? Now, it was too late; it must be too late.

There was the cottage with the green veranda. And there was a woman sitting on the chair by the door. He turned his head away and hurried on. And he had dreamed that morning that he would come to know that woman, understand her and be "different" towards her. Good God, he was different with a vengeance!

His contempt for himself knew no bounds. It seemed to him that he was something poisonous and parasitic, which by its own malignancy had turned aside from goodness and now could never return to it again. That he did not know where or when or how he had turned aside made his condition more grievous, more unworthy and more desperate still. And he longed to be something utterly different from what he was; he longed to be Bettington's Boston and not his own.

Mrs. Williams met him at the door, holding out a telegram. Bettington was not coming. She watched his pale, set face with misgiving, saw with alarm his finger tremble as he thrust

it through the envelope, looked intently at him while he read. Why, he's all of a sweat, she thought. Fancy wearing that great mackintosh all the way home, without a spot of rain. He wanted looking after.

"I hope it's not bad news," she said.

He looked up and hurriedly took off his hat.

"I beg your pardon No, it's quite all right, thank you. My friend says he's coming if he possibly can."

"I'll get the room ready in case," she said briskly. "Your tea's all ready for you."

Nerves, Mrs. Williams decided, as she slowly made the bed in the room next to Boston's. He'd been living too lonely; he ought not to be like that when he got a telegram, even though they were nasty things. She thought of Mrs. Kennington and sighed.

When she went down again she had made up her mind to risk it. She entered the room and said:

"Excuse me taking the liberty. But as you said you'd like the same as us for supper, I thought perhaps you might like to sit down with us Till your friend comes," she added apologetically. "It's rather lonely for you."

He hesitated, instinctively, for a second.

It was another opening away from himself. "It's very kind. I should like to, very much," he said.

"You shouldn't have kept that heavy coat on, walking back, sir."

"No . . . of course not. How stupid! But it was a godsend," he added enthusiastically. "I don't know what I should have done without it."

"Walked through the rain without anything, I expect. That's the way people"—and they seemed very small and far away, those people, like little spots on a distant horizon—"catch their death of cold."

He was sorry for them. "It's very careless," he said. "I expect my things will be here to-morrow morning, though."

"If there's anything we can let you have meanwhile, you've only to ask."

"No . . . I have shaved." He felt his chin. "In St. Albans. That was the only thing." He was too optimistic.

"I've put," she said vaguely, as though she spoke of things utterly intangible, "a night-shirt of Jim's in your bed. It's not new, but it's clean. Better than nothing." Surely she was smiling. "And I've given that collar a rub through and run it over with the

iron. I expect you dropped it into the water-jug," she added. It sounded the most natural thing in the world.

"I didn't drop it, exactly."

"Men have queer ideas," she said. And again he felt that these men, like those people, were infinitely small, queer little spots on Mrs. Williams's twinkling glasses.

He could go on listening while Mrs. Williams explained the universe in words of one syllable. It was like being tucked into bed again. Surely she had a genius for making things easy. Her slow speech, as she seemed to bring the words one by one from an incredible distance, almost curled round him; it gave him time to adjust himself so comfortably, to make as it were a soft place for the next word to fall.

"I had lunch at the 'Crosskeys,' as you told me," he said.

"Did you tell her you were staying with me?"

He had not, and he found it hard to explain; it simply was that he had been too shy.

"I forgot," he said.

"You shouldn't have done that. Always make friends when you can."

"I didn't forget altogether; but when I

remembered I didn't see a chance of telling her. She was so busy."

"They're not generally busy o' Mondays," said Mrs. Williams.

He was getting more and more involved; yet he had the wonderful feeling that with Mrs. Williams it did not matter.

"I don't mean there were a great many customers." There had been five altogether.

"I thought perhaps," said Mrs. Williams, smiling at a comic figure on the remote horizon, "they'd put on an extra market day to worry you."

He had to laugh.

"What'd do you good, sir," she said inconsequently, "is a good game of cards."

She left the room and returned with his collar.

"I don't know why you're so good to me," he said with awkward sincerity. "I'm very fortunate."

"Why, that isn't anything, bless your heart. I like to have little bits of things to do. Fills up the day," she said as she went out again.

With a vague thought of pleasing her he took off the collar he had bought in St. Albans and put on the one she had washed

in front of the dining-room mirror ; then he strolled into the garden behind the inn. He walked across to a green wooden seat as though he were aiming intently at a mark. Why could he not conquer this sense of being an intruder, of being watched ? Mrs. Williams invited him to take possession of the garden, the house, and her own kindness ; invited him so that he knew he must hurt her if he drew back. And yet he could not take possession, simply could not ; something within him shrank and started like an uncontrollable nerve. When she was talking with him the nerve was calm, and he at ease ; when she went away he was as much the timid stranger as ever.

To take possession ! Of this garden even, with the clumps of clean blue delphiniums, washed in a thousand springs, the careless sun-bonneted nasturtiums, the broad-faced sunflowers, the springing unopened hollyhocks like budded wands, the languid petunias, the droning, blind, persistent bees. Here he was, thirty, and he could no more take it into himself than he could at five. No, at five he would have taken possession as blindly as a bee, as directly as that kitten, stalking flies like a little tiger in the coarse grass of

the lawn. "Pss . . . Pss . . . Psss." He bent down and rubbed his fingers together. The black and white tiger came towards him delicately, lifting its slender paws over the grass tops. It dabbed softly at his outstretched fingers, followed them on to his knee, and curled to sleep.

And then there was this queer excitement, this being on the brink of something, this secret knowledge that he must not run away ; this expectation, this fear. He had let go the door for a moment and these two spirits had entered in. He would never get rid of them again. He could only run away and, whatever he did, that he must not do. "I mustn't, must I?" he whispered to the kitten, touching its head with his finger. It stirred in its sleep, yawned, and stretched out a single paw, unsheathing pins of pearl.

He longed for Bettington to come ; he was afraid of Bettington's coming. He longed to be at home in this house ; he was afraid of the step forward. It was stupid, it was mad, but it was real. What was it he feared? And the only answer he could make was, The effort, the effort. Yet he knew there was something more, a thing far deeper than effort or will, a thing which had

no shape and which he could never draw from the obscurity where it lived.

He talked and talked with himself, examined motives, and established purposes, disposed and ordered the troubled surface of his being ; yet there below lay the unseen thing which trembled where no fear was, and said " Stay " when he would have obeyed the trembling. Would it ever be still and vex him no longer ? Were other men so vexed as he ? " They can't be, they *can't* be," he whispered to the kitten.

He lay back on the seat and shut his eyes. He heard a deep steady pulse like a mighty engine in the incessant murmur of the trees, the sudden drone of the swooping bees, the grave and serious note of a man whistling, the faint impatient jiggling of a grasshopper, the *tweet-tweet-tweet-tudle-ludle-tudle-ludle* of a distant, domineering bird saying " Listen to me. I can do it ; I can do it." He had only to close his eyes and he bore a part, a silent but unchallengeable part, in this strange-familiar world of sound. If only he could live there ! But some wandering, homeless spirit had taken up its abode in him and was dissatisfied with its dwelling-place. It would never seek another habitation, nor would it ever be contented.

His consciousness winged softly away, swaying to the great pulse of sound. It fled silently between the bird-note and the murmur of the wind; it passed like a friend among many voices.

"Mr. Boston, sir!" The landlord stood before him, with his hands in his breeches pockets. "You're like me, sir. I can drop off anywhere. Come along and have a bit of supper."

Mr. Boston followed. The drowsiness hung heavy on his eyes.

"It's a fine evening," he said, and his own voice sounded to him unfamiliar and mellow.

"You're right," said the landlord. "After that rain. It's what I call a growing evening. You can almost see the things perking up, see 'em or hear 'em."

Brimming, saturated with sun and sleep, Mr. Boston almost dropped into a chair in the great kitchen, and began slowly to absorb a generous meal. Mrs. Williams's benign influence was there to receive him when his torpor had ebbed away.

"He had dinner at Louie's," she said to her husband.

Mr. Boston woke to the fact that it was he

who had dined at Louie's. He was ensconced in this house as in a comfortable dream!

"Very good bit o' beef this, Polly," said Mr. Williams, as he cut another round and held it out towards Boston.

"I don't believe I'm quite awake even yet," said he, holding out his plate.

"Nothing like sleep," said Mrs. Williams.

"Tired Nature's sweet restorer," said Mr. Boston. He was being positively silly. Yet he felt only a great desire to laugh, as though he had made a subtle joke and the point were suddenly beginning to dawn upon him. "Care-charmer sleep!" He might begin to recite it if he were not careful.

"Who said that?" asked the landlord, after a long pull at his tankard.

"Shakespeare."

"Oh, ay."

"I thought we might have a hand at cards afterwards," said Mrs. Williams. "We haven't played since . . ."

They both began to calculate in silence. It took a long while to reach a result. About the end of May it must have been.

"We used to play regular," said the landlord. "Every Sunday night. Whist. Not this Bridge."

"Jim and I sometimes had a hand of cribbage together in the week," said Mrs. Williams. "But we've dropped out of it somehow."

Mr. and Mrs. Williams began to clear the table. The landlord bore away the beef to the pantry. Mr. Boston's hand hovered; he would have liked to pile plates, but dared not.

"Sh'll I wash up now or afterwards?" asked Mrs. Williams.

"Leave 'em till the morning," said the landlord. He looked into his tankard, tilted his head far back and drained the last drop.

"We'd better fill up again before we begin." He stretched out his hand for Boston's mug. It was only half empty, but he walked away with them both.

Mrs. Williams looked extremely serious when she played cards. It was the only time she did. At others she might be anxious or distressed, but she did not look serious. Not that in playing cards she calculated very profoundly or even seriously. But she had two or three reverend and inviolable rules which seemed to call for gravity in their application. While applying them she dominated the game; she imposed a rich silence

upon it. Her heavy breathing when she leaned across to pull a card out of the dummy hand was far from breaking the silence ; it emphasized it. When she had won, as she fairly often did, she relaxed into a smile at her opponents ; when she lost she also relaxed into a smile.

When Mr. Williams gathered a trick, he seemed to swing his body clean over the table. It was incredible that such a mighty movement should end in four pieces of pasteboard. The table at least was its due reward. Yet the lamp stood there undisturbed, like an engineer among the circling cranks of a steamship, while he came forward, laughing, with his trump.

" Not this time, Polly dear, if you *don't* mind."

Mrs. Williams was silent. The landlord winked at Boston.

This was the way to play cards, somnolently, reposefully, irresponsibly. He remembered playing Old Maid with his mother under just such another lamp. But the shade was pink. He could not remember what he felt then ; it was too long ago.

" You haven't got a trump, sir ? " said the landlord.

Boston started, looked at his cards, and shook his head. "No . . . nothing." And they both turned towards Mrs. Williams. The landlord put his cards on the table deliberately, put his hands on his hips and stared comically at her. Her set face gave way.

"Eight of 'em," she laughed helplessly. "Don't be silly, Jim." She poured a profusion of hearts on to the table. "*I* can't help it," she said.

She began to deal the cards slowly. "Sh—h!" She stopped.

They all listened. There was the faint sound of wheels, the soft crunching of sandy gravel.

"That's no wagon," said the landlord, putting his hands on the table and hoisting himself to his feet.

"Don't stay talking," said Mrs. Williams, going on with her deal.

They sorted their cards in a deeper silence. The kitchen clock asserted itself. Mrs. Williams listened.

"We don't have any customers to speak of o' Monday nights," she said.

She listened again and heard the sound of wheels once more.

"They didn't stay long, whoever it was," she said. Then, after a pause, "It couldn't be your friend, sir?"

Boston had not thought of it; he rose to the surface again. "It's too late, surely."

"It's some one coming along here, anyhow," she said.

He must come right into this circle of quiet, or not at all, thought Boston; he couldn't go out of it to meet him. He sat fingering his cards.

"This way, sir." The landlord opened the door. "A friend of Mr.—"

Bettington stood there in the half-darkness, out of the lamplight. What a stranger he seemed! He might have dropped down from the ceiling.

"Hallo!" said Boston, getting up reluctantly. Bettington came into the light, became real, and shook hands.

"I'm *awfully* glad you could come." The acting had begun. "Let me introduce you . . . Mrs. Williams, my friend, Mr. Bettington . . . Mr. Williams. . . ."

"You do play whist, don't you?" said Boston.

"Hadn't we better knock off, Polly?" said the landlord.

"I'll put a light in the parlour." Mrs. Williams began to move.

"No, don't, please," said Boston eagerly. It was a godsent chance of letting things slide into their own places, and making no effort while they did. "We must have the best of three," he explained.

Bettington stood, in his overcoat, hesitating, by the vacant side of the table.

"There's a hand all ready for you," said Boston. "You came just in time. New game. First deal." He helped Bettington off with his overcoat. Then he pulled up a chair for him.

Bettington put his hand on the chair-back, still uncertain. It was so different from what he had expected. "Are you sure I'm not spoiling your game?" he said.

"But aren't you too tired, sir?" said Mrs. Williams.

Boston was ashamed. "I thought it would be a rest for you . . . a change," he said.

"Let me put a light in the parlour," said Mrs. Williams again.

Boston looked up at Bettington. "Which would rather do, Bett?" he asked with an effort.

Boston had called him Bett once before,

once only. "I'd rather play. But I haven't played whist for years."

"Neither have I," said Boston cheerfully. "I'm just getting into it again. Mrs. Williams has had it all her own way, so far."

"I'm afraid she won't now she's got me for a partner," said Bettington, sitting down in his chair.

"No excuses," laughed Boston, and now that all was safe he wanted to laugh. "We're only beginning to play. The first was just a trial run." He glanced at the landlord.

"D'you hear what he says, Polly darling?" chuckled Mr. Williams. "You're in for it this time."

She was. In spite of her lead, with Bettington's help she lost the rubber. The landlord pounded away to get another tankard.

"It's a tiring journey," said Mrs. Williams.

"You don't feel it at all," said Bettington. "It's so hot in London. To get out of it you'd be ready to walk all the way."

"Mr. Boston did," said Mrs. Williams.

"Did you really?"

Boston smiled and nodded. "I should never have got here otherwise," he said.

"You just turned up here by chance?"

"He very nearly got locked out," said Mrs. Williams.

"He looks as though he's been here a hundred years, at least, doesn't he?"

Mrs. Williams looked at Boston with a smile of satisfied ownership.

"Now that is a nice thing to say," she said.

"Why, you've done what we could never do," said Bettington. "You've made him human." That was not what he meant exactly. "You've drawn him out of his shell."

"It's Mrs. Williams's fault," said Boston. "Perhaps she'll be sorry."

"I think people ought to enjoy themselves," she said generally. And it seemed that the person who failed to reflect something of the gleam in her spectacles must be of a dull substance indeed.

They went on with the next rubber. All through it Boston was warmed by the comfortable sense that not he, but Bettington, was now the stranger. He talked and made stupid jokes; he felt even at one moment that he was showing off his intimacy with the Williamses, his security in their house. But Bettington was only the more delighted

with this simple, childish Boston whom he had sometimes felt but never seen. Even to follow him up the narrow stairs and to be shown his room by him was pleasant, an entering to a hospitality that Boston had never before had the chance to give.

"My room's the exact twin," said Boston, holding up the candle to the print above the bed. "You've got cattle in the Highlands, though. I've got the Royal Family at Balmoral. . . . Your bag." He took two bags from Mr. Williams on the stairs, and brought Bettington's into the room.

"It's very good of you to have brought my things."

"Felicia packed them. That fellow Hone made me write about a Dog Show. That's the lowest, so far. . . ."

Boston was not listening. They couldn't go on like this. He had to give an explanation.

"It seemed such a wonderful inn," he said lamely, "that I felt I couldn't keep it to myself."

"I always believed there were such places, if only you could find them," said Bettington. Then with a sudden resolve: "Have you thrown up your job?"

"For good. It came over me. A now or never feeling."

If only Bettington would go on asking questions they would come to it in the end. But Bettington did not. He wanted to ask, but he shied away.

"It's the very best thing you could have done. You've got some money of your own, haven't you?"

Boston was ashamed. "Two hundred a year."

"Just right. Not too much, and not too little." Bettington turned aside from that path also. "I hope you won't mind. I've asked Felicia to come here. We'd more or less arranged to go away together."

"Mind! Look here, Bett. . . ." He was on the point of crying out that Bettington had got everything wrong, that it was he who had done the good turns, not Boston, that it was not for him but for Boston to ask whether he minded; and then it all seemed intolerably clumsy. "There's nothing I'd like better," he said, dumbly imploring him not to be grateful. To prevent it, he hurried on: "I've never had the chance of knowing her. It was hopeless in London. What the devil was the good of imposing

myself on anyone? It would have been unfair. Of course I was unfair to you. But one victim was enough."

Bettington wondered what he was talking about.

"I've only seen her once, you know," Boston went on. "The night we met in St. Martin's Lane. How it rained! I saw a cardboard box float down the middle of the street, just before you came. I wondered who you two were. When's she coming?"

"To-morrow morning, as soon as she knows it's O.K."

"What's O.K.? Me, I suppose."

Why did he take it so tragically? It was so simple.

"If I were to ask you to come and stay with me," Bettington explained, "I shouldn't expect you to bring some one else. I shouldn't mind, of course, but I shouldn't expect it. The natural thing would be for you to ask whether it was O.K."

Boston nodded, stroking his chin. "Yes, I suppose that's true. But there is a difference, isn't there? If I'd asked you, I should have felt certain you'd say 'Yes.' You didn't feel anything of the kind when you asked me."

"I knew you'd say 'Yes,' " said Bettington sturdily.

"Honestly?"

"Of course."

Boston brightened up, told of the food, the bowls and the garden. While he listened Bettington thought what a very odd person he was. In ways you didn't expect. Fancy his not seeing himself that he would have said "Yes" simply because he would have been bound to. The difference was between saying "Yes" and feeling "Yes."

Boston praised his lunch at St. Albans, told of the hat and coat.

Perhaps he never said what he didn't feel, thought Bettington. After all, he knew very little about him. The kind of talk they had had together had always been definite about things, not people, or if about people about people who were things, writers. It was curious how little he knew of Boston's personal feelings; in a vague way he had made them up or taken them for granted.

"Mrs. Williams told me about a woman here, this morning. A queer story. One doesn't know very much of what goes on. . . ."

Bettington was unpacking his bag. Boston

looked out of the window; a veil of mist had drifted over the moon. He could just make out the seat and the arch behind. He had something to say that would not let itself be said.

"I came here without a stitch," he said. "Late last night."

"What are you going to do?"

No, it was impossible. "I don't know. Stay here till I get moved on, I suppose. Sit in the sun and grow . . . in grace," he added, laughing.

He moved hesitatingly to the door as though not meaning to reach it.

"I'm very glad you could come." He opened the door and slipped outside. "I should have been horribly disappointed if you hadn't. Good night . . . Bett." And Boston hoped that his friend had not noticed that the name would not come easy to him.

CHAPTER VI

POST-MORTEM

"But there sat oon, al list her nought to teche,
That thoughte, best coude I yet been his leche."

—*Troilus and Cressida.*

FELICIA came. The week passed like a dream for Boston; sometimes like a nightmare. They walked together, they talked together, they ate together. When Boston said one morning to Mrs. Williams that he would like to come back to the kitchen "when they go" he knew that he was longing for that day to come.

He felt that he had discovered a deeper baseness in himself; the obscure, unknown, evil thing had lifted up its head again. He did not know why he longed for them to go. He had a horror of being left to himself again now; and yet the horror of their presence seemed greater. It would spring on him suddenly, as though the reality had broken through the dream, and he would be fright-

ened of himself, or of the incalculable, resentful thing of which himself was only the flimsy shell.

But for the most part it was a dream. Each day it began when they sat together at breakfast in the morning with Felicia, back to the window, pouring out the tea. Sometimes it seemed to Boston that he resented the happiness of the other two; that his heart ached when he heard her say "More tea, Bett?", while she said to him "More tea, Mr. Boston?"; that he too craved for a word of her affection. If they would receive him into themselves, things would be different.

Then he doubted whether he wanted to be received into them at all. A fierce impatience of all they said and were and did seemed to be consuming him. When they talked of books, of Mrs. Williams, of the flower-show they had visited together, of the necessity of trying to begin a simpler, truer life than this nervous disillusioned existence after the war, he was interested for a moment, and then the flame of his curiosity was blown out by a wind from the darkness. The conversation became a clatter of empty words, to which he could not, though he tried, attach

a meaning. When they walked his mind, without warning, became utterly vacant: he heard, saw, felt nothing except a desperate desire not to let this emptiness appear.

Sometimes, as though in revenge for this, he seemed to be terribly clear-sighted. He saw that Bettington and Felicia were as far apart from each other as he from them. They too were fumbling with unknowns each in the other, Bettington blindly, simply, devotedly, Felicia with flashes of awareness which made her afraid. He watched her flinging out ropes of pack-thread to the dumb rock of Bettington; he saw her concealed agonies if she lost touch with him, the hesitating movement of her hand to his: and he felt that he ought not to be seeing these things, that it was wrong, and he longed to take Bettington aside and tell him that he must take her in his arms, that she was wonderful but frightened, that they must begin their glorious life together without delay, but without delay.

He swayed between loving pity and resentful hatred, between imploring them to snatch at their happiness while it was within their reach, and desiring them to be gone for ever out of his life, he did not know why. Was

it that he hated them, or did he hate himself when they were by, or had they accidentally come between him and some expectation from his life? He could not tell. But they kept him in a state of hateful awareness or hateful insentience. He swung from pole to pole like a quivering needle, and he tried—oh, how he tried!—to be kind and calm above it all.

Yet he knew by a quick, startled, wondering glance that Felicia sometimes shot at him that she suspected him. Once or twice he caught the look with his own eyes, and afterwards he was aware of it even though his head was bent. He felt it always after his fits of blind vacancy when he broke into words again. He felt it when they had been talking of the impossible life of London. How one was worn away by silly, worthless contacts; how impossible it was to grow! Boston believed it all. Was it not one of his own familiar texts? And yet the reality suddenly fled, leaving ghostly, twittering words. He stared at the table in front of him with a fixed and ordered smile. He wrenched himself out of his cold darkness.

“But why don’t you begin a new life *now*? There are two of you. You must have two. What are you *waiting* for?”

He thought he had managed to keep the exasperation out of his voice; he thought he had spoken lightly with a charming smile. He looked at Bettington and saw that he was not surprised. But he felt that quick, wondering, startled glance from her.

So they reached the Friday. Bettington declared that he must work; he must catch the Saturday post with his notes. He would have them finished by eleven o'clock.

"I must go to the post office and telegraph to the bank," said Boston. "I'll be back at eleven." Not in order to get away by himself—that he knew was unavailing—but not to be left with Felicia. She knew too much.

The moment he had spoken, he knew that he would not escape. He almost waited for her words.

"May I come with you?"

For a long while he talked volubly. He began with Bettington's sense of duty. It was the only way to do the work he did. What astonishingly good stuff it was, too! And he had found it out only by accident, one day when he had been looking through *Woman and Child* at the dentist's. "I wish to God he wasn't so modest," he said. "I

don't know, of course, but I feel he is imposed upon. He told me they made him write an account of a Dog Show the day he came." But it wasn't his ability that mattered so much—though that was first-rate—Bettington was good. Boston became impassioned. That was the only thing worth a damn; he would give anything to be that. Perhaps Bettington learned it out in France; you weren't born good. He didn't mean seeing the best in everything; that was mostly humbug. But facing things, not hysterically, but with the knowledge that they are as they are, and trying to make yourself one of the best of them, one of the most honest. There was a single-mindedness in Bettington that he had never met in any other man. No wonder his most casual writing was good—in a way.

Boston went on and on. Felicia could see the village three flat fields away. She fixed her eyes on the squat spire of the church, like a house of children's bricks. He was being sincere, of course, but it was the wrong kind of sincerity. It was true and false. She didn't want to listen to it.

"What's the matter with you, Mr. Boston?"

"Nothing," he said sharply, then laughed.

"Why, what do you mean?"

She did not like his laugh even.

"I mean, why are you saying all this to me?"

"I'm supposed to say something; this seems as good as anything else—and it has the merit of being true."

"Were you as rude as that in London?"

"I'm sorry. . . . No, I didn't have anybody to be rude to. Otherwise I should have been."

"There was Bett, of course. I suppose he didn't count."

"Oh, I don't know," he said wearily, then stopped short on the footpath. "Look here, Miss Mortimer. . . ." He stared at a tuft of grass and kicked it with his heel. Her very brain was tingling. He looked up at her. She faced him steadily. But was she about to cry? With anger?

"I apologize for being such a boor. You will either forgive me, or you won't. It can't be helped. Let's go on."

They walked on slowly, saying nothing. His eyes followed her feet on the path beside him.

"Would you mind getting between me and

this cow? " she said. It was as though, in spite of his desperate offence, they had been cast together upon a desert island.

He passed to the other side and waved his outstretched arms at the cow ; with a curving sweep of its head it shambled away sideways, having made everything ridiculous.

" You want to know what's the matter with me? " He wanted to say " Heatspots " or " Measles,"—" Heatspots " was better. It seemed to him excessively funny ; he could hardly restrain his laughter.

" Do you see that hedge? " It stretched right across the field in front of them.

" Yes."

" We'll go twenty-five paces to the right of that stile and sit down ; then I'll tell you."

She glanced at him. His lip was trembling. " I think I'm serious," he said. " I like to be precise. No, it's not that. But don't you see that if we didn't fix it beforehand, we shouldn't know where to sit down. Not with a hedge like that."

" Very well. But we'll go to the other side of the hedge, please. Unless there are cows in the next field too."

" There won't be."

" How do you know? "

"To please you."

"Mr. Boston . . . how dare you tease me like this?"

"Felicia, can't you see it's no use asking me why I do anything, or feel anything? I didn't want you to come with me this morning. I know one thing. I'm not fit for human society. I suspected it; but I thought something might happen. It hasn't happened, that's all."

They went forward over the stile. It was she who measured the twenty-five paces and sat down.

"If you've told me so much, you ought to tell me more."

He lay down on his back with his straw hat tilted over his eyes, staring at her grey *suede* shoes. He plucked a grass and began to chew it.

"But I don't want to. . . . It's not that I don't want to tell *you*. I don't want to tell anybody. I don't want to tell myself. I don't want to have to try. I don't know—and I'm not interesting. You think I am; you think there's a mystery, a problem. I swear to you that it's nothing better than—than a dead cabbage. Very likely it *is* a dead cabbage . . . something tight and yellow with a faintly unpleasant smell."

"But I might like dead cabbage."

"Well, you oughtn't to ; and I'm damned if I do."

"I think you're a very unhappy man."

"So do I sometimes, but not to-day. My curse is I'm a romantic ; like all romantics, I begin and end by being romantic about myself. You don't know the little thrill of pleasure it gave me to hear you say that—horrible pleasure. Don't you see that's what I'm waiting for, that's what I'm always playing for ? I don't even know I'm doing it till it's done. I'm really holding out my hat and waiting for some kind person, like you, to put her hand on my arm and say, 'What an unhappy—and unusual man !' There's no depth to which I won't descend."

"You see why I'm not fit for human society," he went on. "I degrade myself. There's something in me which hates and despises this and keeps me away from people. So long as I don't exploit myself, don't write books about myself, don't bait a hook for other people's affection with myself, I'm not so utterly contemptible. I can say to myself : I have at least the decency to hide. Not that I'm doing it now."

"Can't *anything* be done ? " said Felicia.

Somehow he must be saved. She looked sideways at him, quite calmly. His tilted straw-hat hid his eyes. With a long stalk of grass he was making figures of eight in the air, like a complicated toy.

"The only thing to do is to experiment. There's no known remedy for this particular disease."

"To experiment?" she echoed, and felt as she echoed it excitement and a little fear. Then it seemed to her that the very word was wrong, utterly wrong. She did not know how. It repelled her.

"Yes, it's quite a matter-of-fact affair. And it doesn't matter so much to talk about it, so long as we keep him pinned down there—rather a ridiculous object." He fancied he saw a very thin Boston, quite naked, stretched out on the grass. "Just there," he said, and pointed with his finger. Felicia seemed to see him, as though he had been drowned or drugged, very pale, his eyes closed, his hair lank, and his hat still tilted over them.

"He's got no recuperative power in himself," said he, "and he's incapable of receiving it from other people—utterly incapable," he said firmly. "The only thing to do is

to pitch him into a river or a bramble-bush ; tie him down to a railway line, shove him over the edge of precipice. Then he'd have to do something, God knows what. The unfortunate thing is that he's got to do the pitching, the tying, the shoving, himself. He takes a great run, then slows up, sees a soft place and goes for that ; or he ties a very special kind of knot, so that he can wriggle out of it at the last moment. He's a born trickster, just as he's a born beggar. His only chance is that he may get desperate and start running so hard that he can't stop.

"Personally, I think he's a damned unpleasant creature." There was the rasp of real contempt in his voice. He lay there, on his back, turned away from her, his body precariously propped on his elbows. "I feel I should like . . . to give him an enormous kick on the rump." At the word, he swung his leg over viciously at the imaginary body that lay between them, and overbalanced. He rolled over towards Felicia and laughed out loud. "You see, the devil, you *can't* kick him. You only strain your leg."

"This inn—Mrs. Williams—that was an experiment. You and Bettington—that was an experiment."

She loathed the word. "Is this an . . . experiment, too?" she asked coldly.

"Talking to you, you mean? No . . . I don't *think* so. I've got myself well in hand—managed to get my sense of humour on his legs."

She hated his sense of humour yet more than his experiment. Why should she be put off with this kind of thing? It was all lies, lies that wounded her. And yet—what was it that kept her there?

"He *is* an unpleasant creature," she said. Yet again she saw him drowned or drugged with his pale brown hair lying lankly on his forehead.

"I knew you'd think so. That's why I didn't want to tell you about him. You've got a sense of reality. Mine only works by fits and starts, and then it's exaggerated. It becomes a kind of sense of humour. It's not the real thing. When I say he's an unpleasant creature, I'm being kind. You can tell by my voice. It doesn't mean anything. The correct reply for you is, 'Really? I think he's rather delightful.' Instead of that——" He waved his hand and smiled at her.

"So you are playing a game?" she said coldly. She was angry with him, angry.

"No . . . not more than usual." He chewed hard at another stalk. "No, certainly not. And it's a much nicer game than usual ; much less wearing."

"You mean to yourself."

"Of course. Don't say I'm selfish. It's true ; but I can always say I didn't want to begin. And besides—take yourself. You get annoyed with me. Yes, you do. Your eyes give you away, for one thing. So do your hands. Turn them over. Show the palms, I mean. You'll see."

"What is there about my hands?" she said faintly. She laid them on her lap ; they showed bright pink against the black background of her cretonne frock.

"Sherlock Holmes . . . Do you not see, Watson, that these lines"—he traced them with a spear grass—"are much deeper than they ought to be? The lady has been pressing them into the stubbles to prevent herself from bursting out and denouncing her companion."

"I think that's much too clever." She put her hands back on the ground. "You're much too clever altogether."

"The point is whether my deduction is correct."

"Oh, you'd be fortunate if it were," she cried. "I'm sorry for you, truly sorry."

He ignored what she said. "I'm positive your hands wouldn't be marked like that, unless. You're so very light. They couldn't possibly dig in in that way." And then a strange and hateful impulse made him say, "You're rather like Camilla."

"Who was Camilla?"

The question, the voice—he had expected them both. What kind of man was he? He turned his head away from what he had done. "She was a lady in Virgil. . . . It's nothing . . . silly. . . . What was I saying? Oh, yes, I was proving to you that you get annoyed with me. Yes. And I was going to say that that's a thousand times better than getting sympathetic towards me. It's much less wearing for you as well. That's what I meant when I said it was a nicer game than usual—for you as well as me."

"But you haven't told me about Camilla?" She had felt him start away from a memory. He had said that before, to a woman, of course. She longed to know about that remembered woman. But what had it to do with her? These people with memories that they feared and clung to

belonged to another kind than she. She was curious about them and afraid of her own curiosity. She did not want to know really ; she was not made to follow into the past.

"She was only a princess who went so lightly that the ears of corn didn't bend under her feet," he said.

"Oh, is that all?" She dismissed it as he had done. But her voice reverberated out of the past for him. Somewhere, at some time, he had heard that voice before ; or was it merely that he was predestined to hear it, that he recognized it? It seemed to him suddenly that the field, the village, the dumpy church, the still suspense in the air, the sick sinking in his head, were all familiar.

Yes, it certainly was a woman, she thought in spite of herself. And she wondered where and when, whether she was small, what was the shape of her hands. She was dragged out of her present into his past. For all he said, he was the kind of man who had affairs—vague, sudden, inconclusive affairs that gleamed for an instant in an unpremeditated gesture, the unexpected kissing of a hand, an unintended word, and then went out. A flame went out in her own heart. She was desolate, alone, at the mercy of things.

Bettington was years and miles away. She watched Boston staring at the ground in front of him.

"That's all," he said.

He was dead ; he smothered and strangled life. Yes, he had killed himself. She was sorry, but it was no concern of hers ; she had better to do with every atom of her life than to let one single drop fall into the bottomless pit of his being.

"Don't you think we had better go on ? " she said. "We'll be late."

"The queer thing is," he said, ignoring her question, "that I'm enjoying this in spite of —everything. I suppose I'm doing the same old thing in a different way, making an exhibition of my wounds and asking for pity. But, honestly, Felicia, I'm trying not to."

Why did he call her by her name then ? Why then ?

"No, don't let's go just yet," he said. "Half an hour won't make any difference. And we may never have the chance again. Probably saying that has dished it." He raised his head and looked at her. "It generally does." She winced again. "But let's talk about you instead."

She ought to stop him. She wanted to

say, "No, please don't," but the impulse fainted away. They might never have the chance again. She knew what he was going to ask; and then she longed for him to ask.

"Are you in love with Bettington?"

She wanted to say "No" just for this once; she had made up her mind to say "No," but she could not.

"I don't know," she said weakly.

"But you're going to marry him, aren't you?"

His face was hidden by his tilted straw-hat. Her replies depended on his face. He had no right to ask without showing it.

"I don't know," she said again. "Why must I?" she asked the voice.

"Because he's good, better than you or me, finer . . ."

"You or me!" There was an admission, a surrender, that sang in her ears. But how was Bettington finer than she? She did not admit it. She refused to be dragged to meet Boston on his own ground.

"Is he really?" she said coolly. "I have felt something of the kind, sometimes, but not often."

"Yes, I think so. You don't mind my

saying ' You and me ' ? We're not the same, far from it. But you're more like me than either of us is like him."

It was true, she felt, in a way ; but the way was not his way. It was not for her to explain even if she could. She made no reply.

" You and I are corrupt . . ." he went on. " Oh, I don't mean anything terrible. Simply that I ought not to be talking and you ought not to be listening. We know we oughtn't, and we like it. It isn't that we're wicked—not at all. We're on the good side. Even I am. But a man who's not corrupt, who's whole, has a little bell that rings very loud when he's going off the straight. We haven't. Our little bells don't make any noise. . . ."

She listened and rebelled. She was not corrupt, whatever he might be. Her little bell wasn't ringing, it was true, but that was because it had no need to ring. She could listen if she would ; she could trust herself.

" You see the result," he went on. " It's interesting. We're much more precisely and elaborately correct than the others. We have to draw a line, a perfectly straight implacable line, and fix it with our eyes. If we were to close them we shouldn't have the faintest idea

that we'd gone over it. Innocent, candid souls; 'drunk the dews of paradise'; dream-children in a hostile world. It makes you feel quite sad, doesn't it, to think how lonely and beautiful we really are?"

"I don't know whether it's true," she said. "I don't think it's true at all, of me. But if it is, I don't see why you should be so cynical about it. I should think it *is* sad." She had been led into a forest, moonlit and magical; her companion had gone away, laughing cruelly, and she was lost. No, not she, but he was lost. "It *is* sad," she said again.

"It's sad we haven't any little bells, of course," he said. "There are two things to do. One is to experiment." The word itself seemed to touch her and she shivered. "Simply chuck yourself across the line and see if you begin to grow a little bell. The other is to hitch on to some one who has one. That's less dangerous—I imagine it is, anyhow. That is the reason why you'll marry Bettington. You'll feel safe. That's what you really need more than anything. And so do I."

"So you're going to *hitch on* to some one too?" She repeated his phrase scornfully. She did not mind what he said about her any more; but she was angry with him, for him.

"Why do you get so annoyed? If what I say isn't true, stop me. I hate making things up."

"Then stop making yourself up," she longed to say. Instead, she said, "I simply detest your saying I will do this, I must do that. It makes me quite determined not to."

"Perhaps that's what I'm after." He looked up at her quickly, bent his head down, and hurried on: "I say perhaps. I don't know. I believe it all when I say it. But God knows what I'm really up to."

"Waiting to see whether the bell will ring?" she said coldly.

"It wouldn't ever—with you."

"I don't think I want to be experimented on any more, thank you." She rose to her feet and looked down upon him. She glanced away to the village; she felt pale. "We'll go on to the post office," she said.

"There isn't any point. I've got nothing to do there."

"I thought you said you had to send a telegram to your bank."

"I made that up. I wanted to get away, from you chiefly." He sat, clasping his ankles. "It wasn't to be."

" You mean I insisted on coming. I did ; I'm not ashamed. I wanted to help you."

" And now you've begun to see what helping me involves."

" No, I just see you can't be helped at all."

He scrambled to his feet. " Don't say that." He had changed utterly. All the carelessness had gone out of his voice, and he was pale. " I can't bear to hear you say that. It's true, I know ; I feel it's true. But *you* mustn't say it."

" *I* mustn't ? "

" You belong to my world. I've never let anyone come so close before. If *you* feel there's no hope . . . Oh, hell ! " he said abruptly in a changed voice, " of course there isn't. No, it's the best thing you could have done, the very best." He stared at the church spire, and whistled noiselessly.

" Do you mind ? " he said, " if I don't go back with you to the inn ? It's past eleven. Bettington will be waiting."

" Not at all," she said faintly. " Go now, go now," a voice whispered. " But I don't know what to say to him." It was true. She could not face Bettington.

" Say . . . oh, say I wanted to go for a very long walk."

His words nipped her like a cold wind.

"It's not that I mean." She hardly recognized her voice.

Boston looked round. For a moment he was bewildered; then he understood.

"Good God, Felicia! I'm sorry, I'm terribly sorry. Forgive me."

When she saw his face, suddenly drawn, immensely tired, the light clean gone from his eyes, she felt far stronger than he, though but a moment before she had felt weak, abandoned, desolate.

"There's nothing to forgive," she said. "It's not your fault; it's mine."

"But what shall we do?" he said.

They began to walk away from the village to the road. The three of them had been that way before. They called it the long round. It led them across the road, through two cornfields, into pasture again, and then into the St. Albans road at the sign-post.

When they had crossed the road Boston took hold of her hand. He stumbled along close to the hedge, still holding it. Felicia spoke at last.

"I ought to go away, immediately. But Bett would worry."

"Let *me* go away."

"And leave me and Bett together? No, it's impossible."

"The little bells have begun ringing now," he said bitterly.

"Yes, I'm going to hitch on to Bett now. That's just what it seems like, 'hitching on.'"

He wanted to put his arms round her and say that she couldn't, that they were in love with each other and must obey their love. He wanted to kiss her and make her his. He only pressed her small warm hand.

"Yes, it's no good," he said, "and yet——"

She listened, but the sentence never ended.

"I hate myself," he said.

"Don't do that. You're not hateful at all. I wish you were. Then I should never have listened."

"You're not sorry?"

"Yes and no. It's made things difficult."

They looked at the difficulties in weary silence for a long time.

"I believe," she said with a faint smile, "if you had said, ten minutes ago, let's go away together, let's get married, I would have done it. It would have been wrong," she said.

"I knew you would have done. But the bell rang. I didn't know it would. I longed

to say it, but I couldn't. Don't hate me for it, Felicia."

"No, that's what I like you for. I mean it."

He felt a warmth in his heart. He wondered at the way he trusted her wisdom; he seemed to be on the brink of a great simplicity. A strength of self-abnegation was surely flowing into him from her. He saw her married to Bettington, living in some remote country place. He was arriving at their little house, kissing Felicia's small cool hand. After the strain and stress of living he was refreshed again. He would grow old, Bett would grow old; but she would remain always small and delicate. There would be children like her. A pang warned him that it was not quite so easy.

"There are only two days more," said she. "I think I can manage those. Then I shall go away. I think perhaps you're right; perhaps Bett is too good for me."

They reached the inn. Bettington met them. He had not waited for them. His notes had taken him half an hour longer than he thought. He had gone straight to the post office, and, since he had not met them on the way, he had taken a walk by himself.

He knocked at the door of Felicia's room while she was washing. How was it she managed to make a strange room so much her own ?

" Did you have a good walk ? " he asked. " Don't you think he's extraordinarily nice when you get to know him ? "

" He's very queer, Bett, but I think I like him."

" I'm so glad. I knew you would. But it has been rather a strain lately, hasn't it ? "

So Bettington had noticed. What had he noticed, she wondered ? She felt that there were depths in him that she had never sounded, and the morning began to be a dream.

The next two days, instead of having to be managed, gleamed with a delight of their own, an excessive, glittering, almost hysterical delight, as though they had drunk champagne and were acting in a play where each brilliantly improvised his part. Bettington was intoxicated. For the first time in his life he felt that he belonged with Felicia and Boston to a race apart. They were finer creatures than other men and women, breathing a rarer air ; and for the first time his longing to leave the world something, however small,

that would like a crystal reflect its secret aspirations, seemed to him not fantastic, not incredible, not impossible. They three together, supporting, encouraging, kindling each other, would do something. They were elect, precious ; the memory of their laughter even—how they laughed together!—could not die.

On Sunday evening Bettington and Felicia left. Boston drove them to the station in an old governess cart that belonged to the inn. He had not driven a horse since he was a boy. But it was part of their curious exhilaration that he took it for granted that he could, as a man in the mountains for the first time feels that he can walk for ever. He picked up the reins, laughing, he hardly heard what Williams said about holding up the mare downhill, he barely touched her with the whip ; with a gay rush they shot away out of sight of the inn.

Felicia wore a little gray straw hat, with a bunch of yellow rosebuds. A gray veil covered her face. A faded yellow overcoat of thick frieze hung back from her neck. A wine-coloured coat and skirt was beneath. She held to the rail in front with her gray-gloved hand that seemed scarcely able to

clasp it. Though she laughed, the veil removed her utterly. It was as though (Boston thought) she had commenced a very long journey that would never end—as though Gipsy would race her away to the ends of the earth.

When she gave him her hand outside the station, it was impossible, impossible and irrevocable. All his strength seemed to leave him, and his teeth almost chattered when Bettington asked him when they would see him again, and he replied, "I don't know."

He saw her disappear into the booking-office. On the threshold Bettington turned and waved, and Boston waved in reply.

CHAPTER VII

FELICIA'S DEPARTURE

"Hé, Dieu du ciel, je n'eusse pas pensé
Qu'un seul départ eust causé tant de peine."
—*Ronsard.*

HE sat still in the cart and knew that Felicia's going had altered everything. They had been living in a world where there was neither marriage nor giving in marriage, and the difficulties they had feared had dissolved themselves away. They had only to go on as they were in that house, for ever. The bright bubble shattered; it had only been an enchanting illusion, an intoxicated dream; the world was not built that way.

He sat looking at the station doorway as though he half expected that Felicia's great journey would yet end in a twinkling and she appear again. A woman of about her height, veiled like her and holding a bag, stood hesitating on the threshold. For a second he thought that the miracle had happened, for

she came towards him. Of course it was not Felicia. But why was she coming towards him? He looked round to the other side to see if a cart was waiting beyond. Nothing.

"This is Mr. Williams's cart, isn't it?"

"Yes."

She was undoing the door at the back. Automatically he took her bag; it was small but heavy. She paused with her hand on the latch.

"I mean Mr. Williams of the 'Wheatsheaf,'" she said doubtfully.

"Yes. I'm going back there now."

"Didn't he tell you to fetch me?" She was reluctant to get in.

"No. But I'm going there. I'm staying at the 'Wheatsheaf.'"

"I thought perhaps my telegram would be too late. You're sure you don't mind taking me? It will be quite all right. I'm a friend of Mrs. Williams's."

"How lucky I didn't drive away before! I've just been bringing some friends to the train."

"I could have walked," she said, settling herself and closing the door with a quick, experienced twist. "But my bag is rather heavy. It doesn't look it."

He drove nervously down the steep hill and hoped she was not watching.

"I was sure I recognized Gipsy and the cart," she said, "but when I saw you, I thought I must have made a mistake. Yes, it's very lucky; what a very odd thing!"

There was silence while Boston navigated the slope. Every moment he expected her to say, "Won't you let me have the reins?" In her business-like gray coat and skirt she looked exactly the woman who would drive well.

"Mrs. Williams makes you very comfortable, doesn't she?" She plucked her veil away from her mouth as she spoke. "She has an instinct for mothering people."

"I've never been more comfortable." It was straightforward going now; but now that he was free to speak he could find nothing to say.

"Have you been here long?" she asked.

"Just a week."

"Perhaps it was you I saw the other day walking with a young lady."

"On Friday?"

"Yes, it was Friday." She was pleased with her discovery. "I was just getting ready to go. I saw you out of the window."

She looked so pretty in that black and orange frock, and her big felt hat. I couldn't help looking."

"That was us certainly; but I don't remember passing a house."

"Why should you? You had something better to do. Besides, my house isn't very near the road. If you'd been going the other way you wouldn't have seen it at all."

Then Boston remembered.

"You're not Mrs. Kennington!"

"Yes, I am. . . . But how do you know my name?"

"Mrs. Williams happened to mention it. You live at Half-Mile Cottage. What a very pretty house it is!"

"It's very quiet."

"How strange it is! Meeting the only person whose name I know about here, except the Williamses. My name's Boston."

"There aren't so very many names to know. Caulfield nearly all belongs to the big house. I don't suppose there are more than fifty people. It's a parish; but they don't use the church. We all go to Hatley—I mean the people who go to church."

"I'm afraid I don't," he hazarded. He was anxious to establish a bond before the

journey ended ; he had an impulse to blurt out that he knew all about her. " The war's upset all that," he said gravely, knowing that he had begun to play a part.

" Do you really think so ? " The note of eagerness made him ashamed. He was playing a trick, but he was carried along.

" I think," he said with the same gravity, " it's made a tremendous difference to the people who really believed. The fact that the churches aren't so very much emptier only shows that there weren't so many of them. After all, religion is only mechanical with most people. They go to church because it's the thing to do, or because they meet people, or because they like singing or looking at other people's clothes."

" I'm afraid I like all those things," she said disconcertingly.

" Well, the war hasn't made any difference to those. But when it comes to believing in God, it's another matter altogether. I don't say it's impossible to believe in God ; but the God one has to believe in now is not the kind of God I want to believe in. And I don't."

" Don't you miss it terribly ? "

Again he was ashamed ; again he was borne onwards.

"Not now," he said. "You see it happened to me a long while ago. It wasn't the war; it was when my mother died. The war was horrible; but it wasn't God I blamed for it, but men—myself among them. And now it seems much more terrible to me that men should be so blind and beastly than that God should not exist."

"But you're an Atheist." She spoke the word as though she were half afraid of it.

"Yes, I am. I can't help it. I feel that I'm honest at any rate."

The moment he said the word, "honest," he felt that he was being dishonest. He believed all he had said; it was all true: yet again it was all false. He had made things appear important to him that were not important. A lie was in the tone of his voice, even.

They had passed the sign-post; there was only a half-mile to go. He must put things right, and quickly. She sat silent, hidden by her shrouding veil, with her hands in her lap, like a conscience, not accusing the lie, but waiting patiently for the truth. She was invisible; she might be anything.

"I've got no right to talk about these things," he said. "They're not very real to

me now. The only thing that seems to me to matter is goodness. We have to be good, somehow. If we're that, it doesn't seem to matter what else we are. Besides, that's hard enough to take up all one's time."

"Yes," she said doubtfully. "I suppose that's true. But perhaps you need some one to help you to be good. God makes it easier."

"Too easy, perhaps," he said.

They were at the gate. "Let me take the bag, please; it's heavy." He hitched the reins round the gate-post and followed her up the long, winding path. There were half-grown shrubs and bare blank spaces in the garden beds. The new inhabitant had not mastered them yet. And it was still, with the tyrannous enfolding quiet of a Sunday evening. Their own steps seemed a timid violation; the only confident noise was the impatient movement of the wheels when Gipsy fidgeted.

"Thank you very much." She took a key from her purse. He put down her bag on the green veranda, wondering that no one opened to her.

"Are you staying here a long while?" she said, holding the door ajar by the key.

"I haven't even thought of going yet."

"I hardly like to ask you to come to tea. . . . It's so dull. But if you would care to——"

She was surprised, truly surprised, when he replied, quickly:

"Thank you very much. I should like to. When may I come?"

"On Tuesday?"

She slipped noiselessly behind the door. The quiet had swallowed her up almost before he had time to raise his hat.

He had not been found wanting, he felt, as he went down the path. The sense that Mrs. Kennington in some way approved him was precious to him at that moment. In spite of everything he did ring true somewhere; he could pass the terrible test of a simple judgment. After the emptiness left by Felicia's going it gave him almost a feeling of solidity.

The Williamses were at church. He explored the stable-yard, found a box for the mare, and pushed the cart under the shed. He sniffed, and the warm, full, naked smell of the stable was good. A whinny from the next box trembled on the air. There was a clattering of hoofs on the concrete floor, and the dull thud of soft strong flanks against the wooden wall. He opened the half-door. In

the dim light he could see the gleaming brown skin, mottled with black, of a mare in foal. She lumbered her head round to the faint light, and looked beyond him with deep plaintive eyes. He put his hand to her smooth, warm neck.

“I’ve nothing for you, my beauty.”

The dumb, uncomprehending, lovely beast filled the cold silence with her presence; a patient warmth radiated from her. She trembled.

He laid his cheek against her muzzle. The line of her sleek, shining belly curved before his eyes. “You’ve not long to go . . . my beauty,” he said, and patted her, while her moist breath clung about his face.

He seemed to see her looking with the same deep, uncomprehending eyes at a clumsy, exquisite foal; he wanted to put the vision before her, to comfort her. “Good-bye,” he said, latching the half-door, and he stood to listen while she stumbled round to the rack again. He heard the soft dry rustle of pulled hay.

He sat down on an upturned bucket by the yard door. It was incomprehensible. The word dragged its length slowly through his mind. But, God, how beautiful! How beau-

tiful ! About the living centre of that quiet and lovely beast, all life ordered itself, like a pattern of sand on a glass touched by a bow. It was all as it was, it could not be otherwise. He would not have it otherwise. Things were as they were now, inevitable, unalterable, beautiful, with a terrible beauty that with a sovereign nod motioned all joy to silence. There was no room for happiness ; at this centre it could not breathe, and it was no longer desired, no longer desirable.

A sweet ache of longing throbbed through his ecstasy. If only he could know things as he knew them now, always and for ever. Never to be flung off again from this calm centre where there was neither expectation nor dismay, where no friend could help nor lover be recognized, where pride and hypocrisy fell off like a muddied garment, and to surrender all was to receive all, and to be nothing was to be all.

Infinite depths away he could see himself and Felicia and Bettington struggling after a dream, after a faint reflection of the light he stood in now. He could never tell them, he could never reach to them ; and there were no words.

He rose to his feet, shuddering, with a

strange feeling of guilt and dread, like a man who had sacrificed his manhood to a dark Eastern goddess. He escaped from the stable-yard as from the sanctuary of a truth to which he did not belong, and walked up and down on the gravel outside the inn. Warm clouds of relief, cold clouds of regret, passed alternately over him.

The cold slowly gave way to the warmth. He must be true to the human in himself; he could not pay that price for understanding. He wanted goodness not ecstasy. He would surrender, gladly surrender, all he had and was, but not to that; or, if to that, not in that way. "Not in that way," he said aloud, and shivered slightly, as at an obscene memory. He was with Felicia and Bettington and Mrs. Kennington, in spite of all.

"There you are, then!" Mr. and Mrs. Williams sailed slowly up out of the dusk. How comfortable their voices were! And Williams in his best cord breeches and drab cloth leggings and bowler hat—how spruce and solid, like a man freshly carved out of wood.

Mrs. Williams came alongside, breathing heavily. "You got them off safely?"

"Why, he's put up Gipsy himself!" said Williams.

He felt almost proud. "I think she's in the right box. You'd better have a look, though." Williams rolled away into the yard.

"Now come along in and let's have a bit of supper. It's none too warm," she said, rustling her dolman. "Will you be glad to be in the kitchen again? It makes a change."

"I drove Mrs. Kennington back from the station."

"Well, I never!" Mrs. Williams did not pause. She put her dolman and bonnet on the horse-hair sofa in the parlour and produced a clean apron from under the string antimacassar. "Saves trouble. I know where it is."

"She thought I had come to fetch her."

Mrs. Williams took it quite calmly. "She said she'd send a wire when she was coming back. Jim always fetches her. She knows Gipsy as well as we do; drives her better than he does, Jim says. She's a proper woman of her hands."

"She did send a wire, but it was too late."

"She's been to see her sister at Luton. He's very well off, in the straw-hat trade. They've got a beautiful house, built it themselves, all white enamel. They *were* going to have a motor." She bent down to see that her two lamps were burning evenly.

"Well, I never," she said, straightening herself. "And I was going to ask you if you'd care to go to tea with her with me one day. I hope Gipsy didn't play any of her tricks. Come along in." She put one lamp on a table in the passage and led the way into the kitchen with the other. "I think we might as well put a match to that fire. Anything for comfort. It's an uncharitable evening."

He lighted it. The heap of kindling flamed joyfully up the broad black chimney.

"Two of those logs, I think." He obeyed. "You'll miss your friends, won't you? It's not the same thing talking to us."

"Nothing's the same. It's always different. And I've spent a good deal of my life talking to my friends."

"I always say there's nothing like a change. Not that you could expect to find anything better than the young lady. Not in a long day's journey. Is she engaged to Mr. Bettington? They'd make a proper pair; set each other off."

"I don't think they're engaged yet. But they're going to be."

"It don't do to be too sure, not till the ring's on, does it, Jim?" The landlord had

sat down and was making the great leg of mutton look trivial.

"You led me the hell of a dance, Polly, if that's what you mean." He turned to Boston. "I nearly lost this house what with her hanging about. It was going cheap. Free house—there aren't many of them in these parts—and a forty-five acre farm. The brewers didn't know what to do with the land, or they'd have bought it over my head. And old Mr. Baines—that was her father—who could have done with the extra bit of land, wouldn't rent it when he knew I was after it. I'd just got my Dad's money; two years the lawyers took to hand that over. What with her Dad pushing her behind and me pulling her in front, you'd have thought we could have budged her. Not a bit of it. And when it got to the night before the auction and Mr. Baines and me were talking it over in the kitchen and still she wouldn't say, I felt that angry that I had it in my mind to go straight off and ask Loo Manning. There wouldn't have been any bones about her, would there, Polly?"

"You know that best, I'm sure."

The landlord winked at Boston.

"Well, Polly went out of the kitchen into

the garden. 'I won't promise anything,' she said. 'I could smack her silly face,' said old Mr. Baines. I didn't make that up, Polly dear. 'She's a damned aggravating hussy, that's what she is. But you buy it, Jim. She'll come round. 'Tisn't as though there's anybody else in the running.' I said I would; then I thought what a fool I should look if she didn't come round. I made up my mind as I got to the gate that I would go and ask Loo after all. I stood hanging about there. Then I heard her calling, 'Jim, Jim!' A mouse would have made more noise. I couldn't see her. 'It's all right. I'll have you.' Of course, what I ought to have said was 'I'll be damned if you do.' Instead of that I went marching into the dark after that voice, right into the bean-sticks, and I put my boot clean through the frame. And I heard her laughing just beside me. She might have done it on purpose. 'You little devil,' I said."

"That was a nice way to get engaged. I hope Mr. Bettington doesn't say that to his young lady," said Mrs. Williams. Her eyes sparkled with memories.

"I hope his young lady don't lead him that kind of a dance."

"Better do it before than after. There's no changing your mind then."

"I don't know so much about that," said the landlord. "There's nothing but divorces in the *News of the World* now."

"But that's only society folk and actresses," said Mrs. Williams.

"There's a good deal more of them than there used to be, that's all I've got to say. Why, the old paper used to have four good pages of murders, and a divorce only once in a while. Something to read there was then."

"Perhaps it's because men divorce their wives now instead of killing them," said Boston. "That's an improvement, surely."

"There's something in that. Which would you like to be, Polly—divorced or have your throat cut?"

"One's about as bad as the other, I reckon. Which would you like—to be divorced or poisoned, Jim?"

"I'll take the divorce, thank ye. . . . Now poisoning," he went on ruminatively. "You don't seem to hear so much about that nowadays. It seems to be going out. Thirty years ago there was always something about arsenic."

"Perhaps they've invented better ways,"

said Boston. "So that you can't tell whether you're poisoned or not."

"That's a nasty idea. Ugh!" said Mrs. Williams. "I don't like the thought of these post-mortems, cutting your insides up."

"I can't see that it matters much once you're a goner," said Williams. "Might as well cut you up as burn you. That's all the rage nowadays, this cremating. I expect they have to cut you up to burn you, like that Crippen. They would me, anyhow."

"Don't be so horrid, Jim. It gives you the creeps."

"I've often thought," went on Mr. Williams, "what a damn funny feeling it would be, holding some one's leg in your hands trying to get it into the fireplace."

"Jim!"

"If you're going in for that," went on Mr. Williams, "you'd have to choose your fireplace, have to be a baker to trade."

"Or a blacksmith," said Boston.

"Lord bless you, no! A blacksmith only has a tiny bit of a fire. He couldn't get rid of a hand."

"What I'd like to know," said Mrs. Williams, trying to get the conversation back on to reasonable ground, "is how they know

which is which when they've cremated you. They give it you in a little box, don't they? A sort of fine wood ash? How do you know you've got the right lot?"

"I don't know how they do it nowadays," said Boston. "But in the old days it used to be one man, one fire. They put you on a big bonfire, with plenty of wood and oil and incense, and put all the lot into a hole. It was a very swell thing to have done."

"But then they'd burn you alive as soon as look at you," said Mrs. Williams. "You've read Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* under the Bible in the parlour?"

"Oh, by that time they'd given up burning you dead. Probably they had to keep up the burning somehow. And now that they've given up burning you alive, they've begun to burn you dead again."

Mr. and Mrs. Williams thought over that.

"Anyhow," she said, "it's not nice to think about, I'm sure." They sat round the fire comfortably.

"Mrs. Kennington has asked me to tea on Tuesday," said Boston.

"Well now, I *am* glad of that. It'll take her out of herself a bit. She spends too much time, sitting thinking. Don't you go talking

to her of murderings and burnings, though—or of divorces.”

“I don’t suppose I should. But why not divorces?”

Mrs. Williams looked at her husband. “Silly scattermerang of a tale,” he grunted.

“Anyhow, I don’t suppose I should have talked to her about divorces,” said Boston.

“You never know,” said Mrs. Williams.

“I’m driving to Luton to-morrow,” said Mr. Williams. “Would you care to come, sir?”

Boston said he would, bade them good-night and went to bed.

It was hours before he went to sleep. He lay on his back staring up at the dim ceiling, listening to the blind, incessant fluttering of a great moth. He thought of Mrs. Kennington, of Felicia, of Bettington, of the mare. It seemed, in the confusion of his half-sleep, that the mare stood for them all; she was more distinct than they, and she was lovely and pitiful like them. Her plaintive, accusing eyes were making an appeal to him, and though he tried, he could not answer it. He could only say, “My beauty, my beauty,” helplessly, helplessly.

He wanted to put his arm through Betting-

ton's, who was looking at him with his shy, lop-sided smile, and to say something. What was it he wanted to say? Nothing about Felicia, nothing about books or life or thoughts; something for which there were no words. Or were there? "What is between us is good?" He loathed the sound of them. No, no! It was not that. "I need you, I need you."

And to Felicia it was the same. "I need you." But was it? He dozed off. He seemed to grow bigger and bigger, heavier and heavier, to become monstrous; and Felicia became smaller and smaller, daisy size. Yet she remained grown-up, while he sank back into a gross and idiot child. She tugged and tugged at his huge hand. Suddenly one of his great fingers came off, and she fell backward into the sunlight, crying with pain and terror. And he only laughed an imbecile laugh.

He woke gasping, trying to drive the horror of the dream from his mind. It stained him somehow, and he felt at that moment that he would never, never forget it. The memory of it would lie in wait for him. Nevertheless again he dozed; and again he dreamed.

He was in a great dancing-room, with a shining yellow floor and high chandeliers

which, it seemed, could not possibly give the light that shone through all the room. There were many people, but none, he thought, so young as he ; most of the men wore white, clipped beards. It was like an Embassy ball, and though he felt well dressed, he wanted to remain in obscurity. A woman in black with a long train came forward into the middle of the empty floor. She was very sure of herself, and she held a black feather fan, yet she was looking undecidedly round the room. While she was looking he felt in his hand a bunch of unreal white flowers—daisies with blanched centres—which had not been there before, and he knew she was looking for these. He went forward and pinned the posy under her right breast. He saw her breast heave with his eyes, felt it heave with his fingers. He did not know who she was ; he knew only that he had played his allotted part ; he did not know whether it was right or wrong. Nobody seemed to be surprised or glad, not even the woman herself. He sank back into the obscurity again.

He woke in the morning with distinct memories of both his dreams, and a vague recollection of the horror of the first which quickly faded away. He thought that he

would write to Felicia about it, so grotesque did it seem. But during breakfast he changed his mind ; he did not want to write to anybody. He was perfectly happy as he was, and he had a half-resentful feeling that he wanted to be left alone, though it was impossible for him to see that anyone was interfering with him.

Mr. Williams drove him to Luton. He enjoyed himself with the big, solid man in the dog-cart. Everything about him was admirable, from the twinkling pearl buttons of his cloth leggings to the old, torn driving glove he wore on one hand, with the strong thumb showing through. Boston admired the way he bent forward from the waist with a hand loosely poised on his hip, faintly clucking to the horse. And when he told a bawdy story of the lady of the big house a generation ago and her coachman, without exactly enjoying it for itself, Boston enjoyed sincerely the ease with which he told it ; it was a gesture as natural as his leaning forward over the reins. He felt that Williams, with his puckered eyes, his untidy black moustache, his weathered red skin, was a complete man ; he was almost proud to hold the reins when Williams descended, every two or three miles, to get two

tankards of beer, and he noticed how Williams would always bring him into the conversation with his friends, the landlords, who came out and stood before their doors.

Boston found it hard to pay his shot ; he could only do so by paying for another round. Even though he drank half-pints to Williams's pints, he became very hazy in the heat of the sun long before they reached Luton. He began to smile, and the smile never left his face ; he began to talk of things he knew very little about—horses and cattle and crops ; and he began to make plans. Their definiteness surprised him a little even in his condition of blissful confidence, but surprised him delightfully. He was going to marry and settle down in Caulfield or Hatley, "with a largish garden and a horse to drive *and* ride," he explained. Williams considered it all seriously and approved. "Have you got your eye on the young lady, sir ? "

Yes, he had. And Boston saw himself, without the faintest astonishment now, married to Felicia. He dreamily speculated how much money of her own she had. Two hundred and fifty a year ? Bettington would understand. At the bare thought that it might be hard to make him understand, he

married himself to Mrs. Kennington. Bettington and Felicia were in another house near by. He didn't like that quite so much, though it was very comfortable, too.

"It is a lovely day," he said for the tenth time. And then again, "It's rather a pity we're only going so far as Luton."

It seemed to Boston odd, but as delightful as it was odd, that Williams appeared to be enjoying himself also. It was positively thrilling when he capped his last remark with :

"I tell you what, sir. We'll go for a driving tour ; make a week of it. Down to my home the other side of Bedfordshire. My father came from there. Only want a couple of portmanteaux. Damned if we won't." And he clapped his hand on Boston's leg. As it were to clinch the bargain, he offered him his fat pouch of shag.

"It's too strong for me."

Williams filled his pipe with one hand, and lit it with one hand. He did not seem to mind at all that the flame touched his skin.

Boston only wished the driving tour were beginning now.

At Luton, Williams took him to the inn where they would have dinner, and said, smiling, that he would be back in half an

hour. Boston washed and walked out into the street, wishing he had breeches and gaiters too. He felt almost naked in trousers, but happy.

A man in spectacles and an apron came out of a saddler's shop. "You're with Mr. Williams, aren't you, sir?" He gave him a short, thick strap. "Tell him that's the best I can do. Sorry to bother you, but my boy's gone home for his dinner."

"No trouble at all," said Boston. On the contrary, he wanted nothing more than to be treated as a part of Williams. To have the strap in his hand was almost as good as wearing breeches and gaiters. He strolled back to the inn, slapping it against his leg.

CHAPTER VIII

MRS. KENNINGTON

“Most dangerous
Is that temptation which doth goad us on
To sin in loving virtue.”

THAT night Boston slept a heavy dreamless sleep. Immediately after breakfast he wrote two letters—one to Felicia, the other to Bettington. The letter to Felicia began abruptly:—

“I am sending you this care of Bett. I don’t know your address, and probably it’s as well that I don’t.

“Your going made a tremendous difference to me—more difference, I think, than the action of any single human being has made to me for years. If I could believe that that meant I was in love with you, I’d say so and act on it. But I can’t.

“Believe me, I should like above all things to tell you the truth ; but though I am trying to, I can’t be sure of it. But it seems to me

that your going has removed from me a great temptation, and from you a great danger. That sounds (probably is) romantic. I mean this: I belong to the genus bloodsucker, specimen male, and therefore perhaps rather rare. Worse still, I am a discriminating bloodsucker. I fix myself for preference on to the finest natures, the unspoiled growths. Very likely you aren't quite so fine as I imagine you at this moment; but you certainly aren't corrupt as I tried to persuade you the other day.

"You know as well as I do, better, that I tried to represent myself as a fine nature entangled and thwarted, in order that you might have the impulse to rescue me, which you had. It would have been the maddest and most wicked sacrifice. You would have poured all your strength into a bottomless hole. And one day the disappointment would have become exasperation, the exasperation hatred, and then you *would* have become corrupt.

"Your going has made me see this at least—that I meant you as another victim. Of course, I could have loved you, as the word goes. But then I could (I feel) love anybody—a horse even. But that's a delusion and

a snare, a mere disguise for my essential vampirism.

"There's one thing more. Probably you know it instinctively ; but I didn't recognize it so easily. When I told you to hitch on to Bett, it was really the reverse of the desire I had to make you my victim—a kind of contemptuous humiliation of myself and you, of myself through you, rather. As one was corrupt, so was the other. If anything, let my advice turn you against hitching on. The very word, as you felt, is an insult, a degradation.

"But I feel somehow, I don't need to tell you this.

"Goodbye.

"D. H. B."

And to Bettington he wrote:—

"MY DEAR BETTINGTON,—

"First, I have to thank you for bearing with me as you did during that week. It was a week of unexplainable brain storms for me, for which I deserved neither sympathy nor forbearance, much less affection.

"But the important thing I want to say is this. And now I'm about to say it, it seems unwarrantable, outrageous. And yet, believe me, it isn't. Here it is:

"It is possible that Felicia may *ask* you to marry her sometime soon, say—in the next month. I implore you, for your own sake and hers—and mine, don't do it. It will be disastrous.

"I thought of trying to explain, but I can't.

"Thirdly, don't think of me as an honest person (though it happens that I am honest in this particular thing). I am the most tortuously dishonest man that exists.

"Will you please send the enclosed letter to Felicia? I don't know her address.

"BOSTON."

Without re-reading them he put Felicia's envelope into Bettington's and went out to post them. After that he sawed wood till lunch-time. The sweat poured down his body; the drops tickled his chest.

He spent an hour slowly washing and dressing for tea. At four o'clock he set out for Mrs. Kennington's. The day was overcast; there was a tight band stretched across the sky, which seemed to prevent the rain from falling, and to press him to the ground he walked on. He could hardly breathe in the giant embrace. Reaping machines droned everywhere; their sound seemed to hug the

earth like a mist from which there was no escape. His head throbbed with the monotone and he longed for the thunder and the lightning to split the walls of the prison. Even the grasshopper was a burden.

It was a day with no clean edges, no clean decisions ; a day of doubts, hesitations and self-contempts. Boston began to suspect himself. It could not, it simply could not, have been honesty that made him warn Bettington not to marry Felicia if she asked him, and Felicia not to hitch on to him ; he must have been trying to put her aside once more as a victim for himself, to reserve her for the sacrifice. He had abhorrent thoughts ; he felt he could never escape from his own tortuous toils ; he was born like that, he was not responsible ; why not let himself go ? He called up all his reserves of will to put these thoughts out of his consciousness. He succeeded as far as a man may, but he was exhausted when he tapped at the green door.

A little maid of sixteen opened it. Her starched white cap over her blushing apple face reminded him of an urchin in a paper helmet too small for him. She showed him into the quiet drawing-room. It was hardly

big enough to contain the great paraphernalia of tea. Mrs. Kennington was dwarfed by the gleaming cake-stand ; the silver kettle bulged like a pumpkin ; it could have filled the room by itself. Oil paintings looked down at him, grinned sleekly at him through excessive varnish ; he felt that the apple-faced girl breathed on them and polished them every day. There seemed to be polish everywhere, making the furniture, the fire-dogs, the door-handle, the brass vases, preposterously rotund.

In these surroundings Mrs. Kennington appeared to be hiding herself. From behind the barricade of the tea-tray she stretched out a timid brown hand.

" It's very oppressive," she said shyly, and after a swift, embarrassing pause, " Do you take milk and sugar ? "

" Yes, please," said Boston, though he took no sugar. He was asking himself why he was there. A vain question, because he knew there was something he hoped to receive.

" I suppose you read a great deal," he said at a venture.

" Not a great deal. I read very often, but it's mostly the same books. I've tried to read some of the new ones, but they're too

clever. I don't recognize the people. I like things that are simpler—Jane Austen."

It did not seem to Boston that Jane Austen was so very simple; he felt, with a sense of predestined discovery, that he had come upon a person with an exquisite natural taste.

"Then there's *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*. I've read that; some of it's very beautiful."

"Very beautiful," echoed Boston. He was looking at her decided black eyebrows, like two raven's feathers, and her slender nose, the delicate heaving of her nostrils. Her thin brown hands moved swiftly among the cups, they peered swiftly out from the sleeves of her bright yellow jacket of wool.

"I agree with you about the new books," he said. "They're more like a drug than a refreshment."

"I get lost in them," she said; "I never know why things are happening—and then they're always so sad."

"Don't you think it's because the people who write them are lost themselves? they're uncertain. They can't help making them sad because they don't know how to make them happy. I mean they don't know what it is to be happy, so they can't represent their characters as happy."

"I've never thought of it in that way." A gleam of interest, of absorption even, kindled in her dark eyes; she was waiting to hear wisdom from him.

"Well, suppose you had to write a book, and you wanted to make it end happily, what would you do?"

"I think . . ." She paused. "I'd try to make them love each other."

"Yes, that's all very well. So would I. But it wouldn't be enough to leave them together, and *say* they loved one another. You feel you want to know nowadays *how* they did it."

"Whether they really loved each other, you mean?"

"Yes, you want to have it proved."

"There's Mr. and Mrs. Williams," she said.

"Yes, there they *are*. But it's different if you're trying to write about them. You want to know whether Mrs. Williams always loves Mr. Williams and whether he always loves her, whether they really satisfy each other, whether she doesn't dream when she goes to bed at night of some wonderful man—a gipsy in a caravan, perhaps—who would say to her something that Mr. Williams has never said, that she couldn't possibly imagine

him ever saying—something quite simple even, like . . .”

“Like what?”

“Oh, anything . . . ‘my precious.’” Boston hurried on. “Or something that sounds quite ridiculous, like . . .”

“Like what?” came the impatient whisper again.

“Oh . . . ‘Miglet.’”

“No,” she said, looking at him, “I don’t think the Williamses love each other like that.”

“I don’t mean that, so much as whether she—or he, for that matter—wants to be loved like that. If they do, then it isn’t quite true to put them down as happy in a book, is it?”

“If that’s what you mean, I don’t think many people are happy nowadays. I don’t know any. They’re so grown-up.”

“But they have to grow up. They’d die if they didn’t. It’s a law. Grow up or die! Perhaps that’s the same as : Grow up and die! And perhaps that’s the reason why the new books are sad. The writers have begun to find this out.”

“But why?” she cried despairingly.
“Why do they grow up? I don’t want

them to stay small, to stay little things. But why can't they stay simple? A daisy now, that's simple. It dies just as simple as it lives. It wouldn't even matter dying then."

"A daisy isn't really simple, you know. It's a most complicated thing."

"You *know* that doesn't matter. A baby is a complicated thing, just as complicated as you or me."

"But there's the law. 'Now that I am become a man, I put away childish things.'"

"I hate St. Paul," she said vehemently. "He always makes you sad."

"He was a modern novelist, born before his time," laughed Boston.

"I don't think you ought to laugh. You're clever and I'm not. I thought you were going to explain."

"Oh, I would if I could. You're quite right. I ought not to laugh. But if you can't explain, what are you to do?"

"When I said it was a pity we grew up, I didn't mean—I said I didn't—that I wanted people to remain as children. I meant I wanted them to . . . to *grow* up."

He thrilled to her meaning. He was no longer detached and observant; he wanted to find words, yes, to find words for them both.

"You mean, Why shouldn't they be as single and natural as they were when they were born? Why should they die in part of themselves? Why should they always be looking what they are doing? If they aren't doing that, they're just doing what they've learned, like monkeys." He was silent. "I don't know," he went on. "They become conscious—it's the law again. You can't wish them unconscious again, though there are people who do."

"Self-conscious, you mean?" She was being taken far beyond her depth.

"Not in the bad sense; a sense that's neither bad nor good. We are conscious just as a fish swims. It's a function, a property distinguishing us as human beings. And like all functions it develops. Once there was a balance between it and the other functions. I don't know when. Some say the Greeks had it, some say we had it here in England three hundred years ago. But since then it's over-developed. It feeds on the other senses. One can't be single or simple any more."

She knitted her brows, determined to unravel his dark sayings. In her presence he felt a calm slowly invading him; he was

becoming acquiescent, and, as it seemed to him, clear-headed. No, not clear-headed. He wasn't thinking really. It was as though he were becoming single and simple himself.

"But it isn't this consciousness"—she said the word awkwardly—"that prevents the Williamses from being happy, if they aren't happy, is it?"

"I think it is, really," he said. "It's consciousness makes us form impossible ideals." He paused to think over what he had said, to weigh it scrupulously, to adjust it against his own instinctive feeling. "And yet I'm not sure. Perhaps it is the dissatisfaction, the lack of a natural fulfilment, that comes out in the consciousness as an ideal." What terrible words! He hurried on. "I mean something like this. Suppose Mrs. Williams is unhappy in the way we said, suppose she does dream of a gipsy who'd say wonderful things to her, it's probably not because she wants the gipsy or anyone else to say those things really, but because Williams fails her in some way that she couldn't describe, doesn't even know, can't possibly know. It comes out as a longing for a romantic gipsy, just as our deep desires

are said to come out in our dreams, though we can't recognize them.

"And yet, you know, I don't quite believe it. It seems to me only half true. Consciousness is something more than a pond in which our true selves are dimly and brokenly reflected. It too is something that we have to satisfy. It makes demands that we can't refuse; it's royal and we must obey. Nowadays it's the fashion to believe something different. One man says, distrust the consciousness; another says we're merely gregarious animals, animals that hunt together; another says that our true life is only revealed in our dreams. It's all renegade, all treachery. They're trying to rush us back to the animal. We can't be animal, or if we can, we shall be like the dog that returns to its own vomit. Two Peter, two, twenty-two. I can't forget that text: 'And the sow that hath been washed to wallow in the mire.' We've been washed. And then there's the other side, the people who imagine they inherit the tradition and safeguard it; pose themselves as the bodyguard of civilization. They're the worst humbugs, the pure intellectualists. People who pretend that there's no right or wrong because you can't prove it. I don't

mind that; I'd admire it if they had the courage of their convictions; if they would openly do everything that the world believes wrong."

"But they'd be put in prison, wouldn't they?"

"I don't mean those things. The things you're put in prison for aren't important generally—except murder."

What could they do? He didn't know. He went on abruptly:

"I hate people who stand on the edge and snigger at the people who are struggling in the water." *Suave mari magno*. He suddenly detested Lucretius.

"But I don't know any such people. The people I know all want to jump in after you. You wouldn't like that, would you?"

She couldn't be mocking him! Impossible. And yet . . . No, it must be her simplicity. She was determined to follow what he said. But he was shaken by the feeling that to ask him point-blank what he meant sounded like mockery. There must be something wrong in what he was saying. Was he showing off? Or was it that they moved in different worlds?

She had not understood what he had been saying. But she felt he was being tossed

about on a sea of doubts ; she longed to help, longed to understand in order to help. And then she did not want to understand at all. It was bad enough not to be able to believe in God any more. She couldn't deal with more than that. But he, she felt, had gone far beyond that ; he was lost in a dark forest which she dared not even try to enter.

Yet behind all this she felt that the forest was not real. It could not be real. He made it somehow, by his very efforts to escape. It couldn't be worse than not believing in God ; it could only be more tangled. It must be so, or why should he tell it all to her ? He must believe that she would know about all that was real in it. But these great words . . .

She watched him as he stared out of the window. The dull light suffused his face. He was more like a woman than a man really, more like a child than either.

" You're worried about something ? " she said.

Again there seemed to him something mocking in the simple question. He looked round at her and smiled. No, the mockery was not in her ; it was in the words themselves.

"Oh, nothing particular," he said.

That hurt her. As if she didn't know he was worried about something. He was trying to fob her off. She hadn't begun the whole thing.

He turned back towards the light. He would have liked to walk over and take her in his arms and crush her to him. "Kiss her away." Mrs. Williams's words swung out from his memory. He would get some of her simple strength, her mere being; he would make himself real, he would find rest. Rest, rest, rest! All thought of the difficulties, the shock, her refusal, had faded from his mind. To do it or not to do it was the simple question. He had only to take her hand; the rest would follow. And there in a moment of time he fought a great battle. The whole action had focused in the taking of her slim brown hand. As he stared out of the window he saw it before him, infinitely desirable, to be held for the sheer thrill of contact, to be grasped as a symbol of rest. He knew, was deeply certain, that she would not deny him at the last.

"You can't use people," came the answering voice. To use others was to abuse oneself. It was not a conscious thought, but it came to

him with a sudden, almost blinding force. Violation of others was violation of himself. The only warrant for breaking through the defences of another personality was the deep determination never to have done with it, to carry it with one for ever, to find oneself through it and in it.

The thought fixed itself in him, expanded and glowed, burned him in a white, purifying flame, renewing him mysteriously. He was in some secret way justified. All his shrinking from contact, all his refusals were to this end. He had been waiting for the certain knowledge, held back by instinct from the lesser thing. The taking of a wife or the taking of a friend was an eternal act; if it were less, it was a treachery, a degradation.

The fight was over. He turned back towards her. She thought she had never seen a face so . . . she could find no thought for her feeling.

"You see," he said, "I believe in happiness."

Happy—yes, that was the word. And he had found happiness! She was bitterly disappointed, as though he had found a pearl of great price and had not shown it her. She had helped him find it—she felt certain

of that—and now he held it away from her, tight clenched in his fist.

She had never had such a feeling before, never a feeling comparable with this. She had been taken into a strange world where the joys and sorrows were unseen, sudden, terrible ; where neither God nor the existence of God seemed to matter at all. She broke into speech.

“ So you’ve found it ! *Your* happiness ! ”

Stung to the heart, he stared at her. She clenched her hands passionately and bent her head down to them. Two big tears formed in her eyes.

“ Don’t you think I want to be happy ? Why don’t you tell *me*, why ? You think I’m only a woman ? ”

He could say nothing ; he could not even try to comfort her. He was frightened by what he had done. In spite of himself and his victory, he had used her. He deserved her passion and her scorn. She had a right to what he had discovered ; she had given it him. And he dared not even tell her what it was.

He was afraid of her now. He had never dreamed that such a fire of misery was smouldering within her, such a fire of passion.

It would devour him unless he escaped. At the moment he had won to his own peace he had shattered hers. Though it was beyond all his experience he felt no doubt of it ; it was blindingly clear, and he was afraid.

He longed to go, but could not. He was responsible ; he could not run away. Yet the shame of sitting there watching her, while with clenched brown hands she stared beyond him at nothing, was unbearable. If what he had found were true, surely it could bear being told ; to tell it was the only thing to do. But to tell her what he had found was to tell her the manner of its finding ; there was nothing else to tell. And to tell her that was fatal.

He rose and stood nervously holding out his hand. Her eyes were still fixed on the void beyond the room.

" I can't do any good . . . to-day," he said.

" It doesn't matter," she said dully.

" Perhaps if I came . . ."

" It's not your fault." Her voice quickened.

" It's mine. I'm hateful, hateful. I'm being punished. It's my punishment.

" But why should I be punished ? What have I done ? I haven't been wicked. Is running away from a husband who's horrible

being wicked? Did they take my baby away for that. I hate God, I *hate* him.

"Why am I punished? Why can't I be happy any more? I was once. . . ." Her voice sank, as though she remembered things.

"No, I don't believe I was ever happy," she went on. "It was all misery, one way or the other. But I always felt I could have been happy.

"It's not true. It doesn't matter what you say. The more you *could* be happy, the more miserable you are. That's the rule, really."

"I don't believe it," said Boston stubbornly.

"I wish I'd never seen you," she said with a cold vehemence. Then with a sudden gesture she put her hand on his arm. In his imagination it seemed to burn him. "I don't mean it. I don't know what's come over me this afternoon. It's as though a little iron box I had inside had been broken and things keep coming out. But I'll mend it again."

And it seemed to Boston that the look in her glittering dark eyes meant something different, that it was saying that he must mend it, for she could never do it herself. He could almost fancy that she was holding out the broken box to him, and telling him to make it as it was again.

"Perhaps if I might come again another day . . ." he faltered. Even if the box were mended she could never put the things back again ; they had escaped for ever.

"No," she said. "I don't think it would do any good."

He wanted to assure her that it would, that between them they could make it right again ; but a deeper impulse compelled him to say :

"No, perhaps not. . . . Good-bye."

There was nothing else to be done. They shook hands. Even in his lightest grasp he seemed to touch the very bones. How slim and frail she was ! It added to his burden of guilt. He crept out of the house like a criminal into the late and leaden afternoon.

The fire that had blazed in him a few minutes since was burning low, muffled and choked by his sense of guilt. The breathless, brooding sky would put it out altogether, he felt, yet it smouldered on. As he turned the edge of the wood and passed out of view of the cottage, the distant mutter of thunder began. Lower than the drone of the reapers, it dominated them. Sullen drops of rain fell, one by one. A shiver of warning passed through the tree-tops. The weight began to lift from his heart again.

CHAPTER IX

BETTINGTON DECIDES

"For whan he saugh that she ne mighte dwelle,
Which that his soule out of his herte rente,
Withouten more, out of the chambre he wente."

—*Troilus and Cressida*.

THAT evening Bettington received Boston's letter. He was on the point of getting ready to dine with some friends. He had made up his mind to dress. Evening dress gave him a confidence in his own appearance that he seldom felt without it. In the summer, when he need not wear an overcoat, he sometimes got out of the Underground a station before his destination for the pleasure of walking along the street conscious of his own distinction. To-night he would be disappointed of that. The rain had begun; and as he looked down from his window at the fast disappearing gray of the pavement of Fetter Lane he had begun to wonder whether it was worth while to dress at all.

He settled down in his big writing-chair, and held the letter poised cornerwise between his finger-tips, blowing it round like a toy-windmill. He knew Boston's writing better than his own. When his bank book came to him in an envelope he had himself addressed, he was always a little surprised at the writing. The pleasure of getting a letter from Boston was so great that he would sharpen the fine point of it by delaying. It was a fat letter, too. How fond he was of Boston! Boston's strangeness only added to his love. Sometimes he felt that he would give more for a sudden gesture of affection from Boston than for anything else in the world, and that he was hungering for some final acknowledgment by Boston of his place in his life. The smallest, slightest gesture would be enough; he could not mistake it, and it would suffice him for ever. . . .

He was almost shy of opening the letter. Something had been going on in Boston's mind during that queer week. At moments he had thought that Boston positively hated him; then he made up his mind that Boston repented having called to him. One did not give up one's fortified positions without pain, without hatred even. Perhaps the letter

contained Boston's acknowledgement of the new situation. He opened it. He was disappointed.

Boston's was the maddest letter. There was nothing in it except this strange request that he should not marry Felicia if she asked him. He did not mind that ; it seemed to have no reality. But nothing for himself ! The letter ignored, treated him as non-existent. Bettington was hurt. "Don't think of me as an honest person." That must be the explanation. Boston was sick to death of himself mistrusting everything, his friendship for Bettington above all. Yes, he felt vaguely that he understood why he had been neglected.

But this about Felicia, what was the meaning of that ? How could Boston know things about Felicia that he didn't know himself ? He did not pretend to understand her, but Boston ! That was a brain-storm, if you liked ! He tried to laugh and discovered that it was not a laughing matter at all. Had those two a secret between them ?

A grain of suspicion drifted into his heart. He thought of their walk together ; he tried to remember what they had been like when they returned, and hated himself for prying.

Could it be that Felicia had told Boston that she might ask him to marry her? Perhaps she had been waiting for him to ask, waiting for months. Women were so difficult. And Felicia had always been so different, so easy, because he could always believe that she meant what she said. He had believed her when she said she couldn't afford to fall in love. She had never said those words exactly, of course; but it had been understood. And if she hadn't meant that why had she told Boston and not him? After all, it was his right. He had known her for years now, ever since his first leave.

And then, why should Boston tell him not to? Damn it all, that was interference. A grain of pride drifted into place by the grain of suspicion. It would have been different if Boston had ever acknowledged that they were really friends, united by a firm bond. But to dictate in that way with things as they were was intolerable; he resented it.

Yet resentment found no firm point in Boston to attach itself to. It flagged for lack of an object. Bettington felt it was artificial; he did not even want to resent what Boston had done.

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It was all mysterious ; he was bewildered by it, and above all he could see no reason why, if Felicia did ask him to marry her, he should say " No."

He took up Boston's letter to her ; the seeds of suspicion and pride swelled as he looked at it. He held the secret in his hands ; he had a right to know, a desperate longing to know. The seeds burst, and a great creeping tree hurried its branches and its roots into every corner of his being. He went into the kitchen and steamed the letter at his boiling kettle. He wanted to draw back, but he could not. He loved Felicia ; he could not lose her. He would explain it all to her one day. . . .

The letter seemed to be poisoning him. An essence went swiftly and stealthily through his blood, darkening and curdling it with bitterness. He had been betrayed. This was what it was to have friends ; they shut you out and trampled on you. He hated them. He sat in his kitchen, desolate, embittered, abandoned. The noisy kettle clattered its lid and spouted steaming water on to the floor.

Why, why had he opened the cursed letter ? Some fate compelled him to make

himself more treacherous still than they. Everything was poisoned now.

A voice whispered to him that his despair was all comic, unreal, false ; that there was nothing so terrible even in having opened the letter ; that it was, in a way, only an accident that Boston had not left it unsealed.

He was divided between a jealous, exclusive love of Felicia which had suddenly unfolded in him, and a feeling that there was nothing at all to cry out for. She was his, said the dark embittered part of him, and his possession had been cruelly and treacherously violated. He had no claim on her, said the other ; she had always been free. These things happened, and it was for friends to accept them. He swayed between the two deep arguments till they both dissolved away, leaving only the ache of loss. He had lost Felicia, and he had lost a part of himself with her. Life would never be simple any more.

The clock chimed out eight, mocking him. Without Felicia it meant nothing. The silvery voice came from a great barren waste.

He could not give it all up ; he must see her. He would ask her to marry him.

He sealed the letter again and put it in

his pocket. He sat on the top of the Chelsea 'bus in the pouring rain, with an old umbrella over his head, utterly shut off from the world around in his little dark tent. How separate he was ! And it had happened in a moment of time. The tiniest thing emerged, and you became friendless, forlorn, utterly alone. He thought of himself in an empty cottage in the country, crouching by the fire. The very sound of the drops of rain in the darkness chilled his spine, and he moved furtively, full of fears.

It was the emptiness that frightened him. Surely he had a right not to be left empty like that, not to be flung off like a little, cold, separate drop into the frozen darkness. Damn it all, he hadn't had so very much in his life. He had worked and worked ever since he was a tiny boy. He saw himself wandering years ago into the dark arches of a board school ; he was incredibly small, and some one held him by the hand, leading him into the gloom, a little frozen, separate drop as he was now. He saw himself—good God ! *how* small he was—with his hands clasped behind his back, saying his multiplication table to a huge gray-haired teacher in a flannel blouse and pince-nez ; he was

plaiting coloured strips of paper at a tiny desk. Even the children were huge beside him; when they laughed, it was so loud that it frightened him. They chanted "Seven ones are seven" in unison, and it boomed in his ears like thunder.

Why had it always been so dark? Now he came to think of it, there was no sunlight in his memory at all. There was only gloom and grit and sordidness, amid which he had run like a drop of water in gray dust, complete and separate and hidden. And everything had been so huge, as though he was condemned to wander from cavern into cavern. Caverns and darkness and terrors! Oh, yes, he had been loved by his mother and he had loved her. But somehow it had made no difference; it had never lighted the darkness or driven the terror away. Why did he always see her, as he saw her now, in an ugly gray cloth cap of his father's stuck through with an evil-looking hat-pin, her hair looped untidily under it, her arms pink with soap and water, pegging out washing in a dank and mildewed garden? Why was the clasp of her fingers always soft and slimy with soapsuds, and the balls of her fingers so puckered and rough that he shrank under

the touch? Why had there been no relief from it all, not one lovely, calm, sunlit thing to look back upon? Why had he worked with terror in his soul at the grammar school when he had taken his scholarship? Why had he never had a moment's enjoyment of his own cleverness, even? Terror and darkness, terror and darkness.

Damn it all, he hadn't much to look back upon. The war had come as a holiday to him: suddenly, after slaving as a reporter for a country paper—London correspondent, they called it—to have become, simply because he was a part-timer at London University, an officer and a gentleman with an account at Cox's! Yes, he'd got bored with the filthy mess eventually; but the people who howled over the horror and misery of it all never knew what it was to feel free for the first time in your life, to have some money in your pocket that had not been wrung from the world. Even now, when the boredom of it was his keenest memory, he thought it well worth what he had had to pay. All this talk about war was rot; it was the one great giver of freedom to men who had it not. It had made him as careless as he would ever be. You don't get a world without

wars by crying over it; you have to give men liberty and money and delight.

Damn it all, he'd a good mind to go back to the army. If he had to be separate, he would rather be separate there. And there came to him the vivid memory of a day, a brilliant sunlit noon-day, when he had advanced with his company through a bad barrage. His wind had given out completely, for the asthma had caught him by then. It was as though he struggled for years at the bottom of a dark water that was drowning him; he fought for breath in vain until the blood beat like a great hammer on his heart and ears and eyes. And he gave up; it was better to be drowned and find rest. He sat on a tree-stump while his company scattered past him, and the shrapnel was no more than whistling rain to him. He could have stretched out his hand to catch a drop; he could have hugged one to his heart. Only when the painful breath came back to him and his eyes again saw the sunlight on the surrounding wood, had he cared to avoid death and make an effort to break out of the shell of separateness that held him. His men had thought him a hero after that.

The memory brought him delight, not

because he had been thought a hero (that was comic !), but because his separation had been so perfect. He had been alone and complete, nothing but himself, remote and hard, like a little spent meteorite. That was what he had always been ; that was what he should have remained ; that was what he should return to now, and find again that strange delight in being infinitesimal, unrelated and unconquered.

But the wall had been broken ; and he was drawn by strong invisible hands out of himself, straining towards some other perfection that he had not. He did not know what it was. Sometimes he seemed to have glimpses of it, that was all. There would come a moment of silence with Felicia, a moment of silence with Boston even, when unutterable wings seemed to be hovering in the air. And now that he had felt their fanning, he was to be shut out from it again.

Well, it was nothing to cry about ; he had to accept it and he would. Under the effort of his will to accept, he felt that his heart was cracking, like a far-off material thing, like a little bowl of fine glass, cracking with a faint, clear, far away note, inexpressibly beautiful, with a wistful, plangent beauty

that he had never known before ; and he ached with longing for the place whence it came. The longing bore him away, infinitely far away from the world on a shining, separate and predestined path.

He was perfectly able to see Felicia now ; it would all be easy.

He tapped at her door softly, listened, and heard the sound of voices. All the better ; he could face a whole world triumphantly. He tapped again. Felicia opened to him. In the shaded yellow light that escaped into her little hall, she could see only his glistening umbrella and the solid mass of his face.

" Bett ! I didn't expect to see you. I *am* glad." She took his hand in both of hers.

" I've got a letter for you, from Boston."

" Oh, put it down there." There was chagrin in her voice.

" Won't you read it now ? " he persisted.

" I can't."

" You'd better, really."

" I *can't*. I've got people." Then in a louder voice : " Come along in, Bett."

" Are they going to stay long ? " he whispered.

" I don't know."

He entered Felicia's bare sitting-room, with its shaded light and vast expanse of yellow matting. "Miss Considine . . . Miss Sidney . . . Mr. Heffer."

"Will you have your stool, Bett?"

She ran out of the room and fetched a square, solid stool, while he tried, in vain, to substantiate a dim memory of having seen Miss Considine's heavy face, her drooping lids, her languid, massive arms, before. She lay back against the wall on one of Felicia's low divans. Mr. Heffer clasped his knees intently at her side and stared with vague eyes and thin-pressed lips at some unknown spot on the floor. Miss Sidney jangled a handbag in the big arm-chair.

Mr. Heffer focused his spot, seemed to find what he was looking for, and began to writhe, like the Pythonissa, before delivering his oracle.

"I *think*," he said in a high staccato, "that he's all wrong. It's simply silly to ignore the realities. There *are* realities. To talk as he talks is misleading, positively dangerous. We're dealing with the *actual* world."

Felicia squatted on a divan to herself, like a Turk, and lit a cigarette.

She wanted to put the letter clean out of her mind ; to thrust away also the encounter with Bettington that she knew must follow. She wanted Bettington to remain as he was, something far away from her on a stool, one of a group of creatures, with no power to disturb or change her.

" They're talking about Romain Rolland," she explained. She might have been describing marionettes.

" Who is he ? " said Miss Considine in a curiously tearful voice, lifting up her eyelids for a second. " Didn't he write a novel ? "

" That was pre-war," said Miss Sidney impatiently, exploring her bag for something. " Now he's *Clarté*."

" *Clarté* ? " Miss Considine repeated doubtfully as though in sleep. " I don't know that word. It's not the same as *démodé* ? I haven't been in Paris for such a long while."

Mr. Heffer writhed himself, but this time not for an oracle.

" *Clarté*'s a movement," said Miss Sidney with a snapping, hysterical laugh.

" Oh, a *movement* ! " Miss Considine said it blissfully, as though it completely explained her ignorance.

" Really, Miss Considine . . ." said Miss

Sidney. "It's no wonder we . . ." Her voice cracked into silence.

"But if you only knew how many movements . . ."

"There are movements and movements," said Miss Sidney, with a spasmodic opening and shutting of her hatchet face.

"Of course," sighed Miss Considine. "Tell me about this one, Lissy, there's a dear, otherwise I shall put my foot in it again."

Felicia laughed. "I don't belong to it." She didn't belong to anything, she thought. "But I think it's to give people information, so that they don't get rushed into another war."

"Oh . . . But surely they know enough about it by now."

"Human beings *are* known to forget," said Mr. Heffer.

"But what if they don't *want* to remember?"

"That's precisely what I was saying," said Mr. Heffer.

"Were you really? I'm so sorry. . . ."

"Not at all. I'm glad you agree with me. The reality is that people don't want to remember about war; just as they don't want to know how they are governed."

Bettington decided, quite correctly, that Mr. Heffer was a civil servant.

"I forget so *many* things," went on Miss Considine. "But I always find it was because I didn't want to remember them."

"*Clarté* is to make them remember," said Miss Sidney.

"*That's* why I don't like it," said Miss Considine, opening her eyes wide, as though she had made an exciting discovery.

"But you don't know anything about it," snapped Miss Sidney. The dull green beads on her scraggy neck seemed to flash into hostility.

"Oh, I thought Lissy had explained it."

That was too much. Miss Sidney relapsed into a scornful silence. Felicia hastened to interpose. Bettington could see her smiling.

"No, Jimmy, I didn't. I don't know about it myself. Miss Sidney's the secretary."

"Are you *really*?" asked Miss Considine.

"I'm only a local secretary," said Miss Sidney, mollified. "For the Garden Suburb."

"But how do you manage it all? You're in another . . . movement, aren't you? I remember Lissy saying. . ."

"I *am* a psycho-analyst; probably that's what you mean."

heart with a stethoscope, you know," said Miss Sidney coldly.

"That's just what I felt. I wanted a change . . . But they are real doctors?"

"Yes, real doctors."

"So, you're a doctor, too. How interesting!"

Miss Sidney was quivering with suppressed rage. "No, I'm not a doctor. A great many psycho-analysts are, but not all. But I have assisted Dr. Sidebotham ever since he began to practise in England."

"I think . . . I should prefer a man."

"I'm *sure* you would," said Miss Sidney.

"I'm so glad you agree . . . Did you say Dr. Sidebotham?"

Mr. Heffer was writhing again, clasping his knees. His trousers squirmed up his leg, and his white spats blinked conspicuously.

"I think it's rather unwise," came his high staccato, "to begin . . . unless . . . you are actually feeling ill. It makes morbid people healthy, but it makes healthy people morbid."

"There *are* no healthy people, from the psycho-analytical point of view," said Miss Sidney.

"Not even after they've been done?" cried Miss Considine.

"We can clear up the past, but the accumulation immediately begins again."

"How very tiresome! I suppose one would have to go every day."

"Theoretically, yes; but for practical purposes intervals of three months are sufficient." Miss Sidney was addressing Mr. Heffer; but, alas, he took too long to wind himself up. It was Miss Considine who replied.

"That's very convenient. Whenever I go to the dentist, I shall go on to Dr. Sidebotham. So easy to remember. Now that's a thing I shall want to remember, and I shall."

"I'm afraid you won't find it so easy to see Dr.—Sidebotham," said Miss Sidney, icily pleasant. "He has a very long waiting list."

"Oh, I think I can manage it, somehow . . . thank you."

Bettington and Felicia stood completely aside, watching the struggle. Mr. Heffer seemed to be deeply involved in it; but unfortunately the tempo of his writhings clashed with the tempo of the argument. Coincidence was rare and ridiculous. Bettington wondered whether Miss Considine knew all about *Clarté* and psycho-analysis, really.

She might perfectly well know anything. Her massive ease, the indolent poise of her heavy head, her sheer completeness were very beautiful. He could not help thinking that she was playing with Miss Sidney. Yet it did not matter whether she was playing or not ; her ignorance would be as complete as her knowledge, instinctive and devastating. He could have gone on watching the game for ever.

So could Felicia ; but she also wanted the game to be prolonged. It stood between her and the facing of Boston's letter, and of Bettington. Bettington would make her read the letter. The very thought of opening it even was intolerable. Why—~~hadn't~~ she gone away immediately as she said she would ? Instead of that she had waited, waited—and for this very letter that she now wanted to destroy unopened, unread. She followed the conversation intently, dreading the moment when it would stop.

Suddenly she thought she would make Bettington read the letter to her ! It seemed a pure inspiration. She felt that it would somehow carry the whole thing one stage further on ; they would be in fresh country. Now she was impatient for him to begin

reading it, and she longed for the conversation to end.

It was as though her will had maintained it, even though she had barely spoken. Miss Considine rose, superbly balanced, to her feet. Her great shoulders dominated the room.

"Thank you so much," she said to Miss Sidney. "I've really learned a great deal. I'll find the address in the telephone book."

"Sidebotham's a fairly common name," said Mr. Heffer, standing and wringing his hands now that his knees were out of reach.

"Is it really?" said Miss Considine. "I shouldn't have thought that."

"~~Dr.~~ Sidebotham's initials are W. M.," said Miss Sidney, grudging and stern.

"Thank you so much. W. M. . . . W. M.," murmured Miss Considine. "Good-bye, Lissy. I don't suppose you'll recognize me when you see me again." A distant smile descended upon her large, clean-cut lips. "I suppose one does know oneself afterwards, when one comes to." She moved splendidly out of the room.

"People have no *right* to be so apathetic," said Miss Sidney querulously. It was as though her hostility to Miss Considine had

held her together, and she now collapsed. "You can't wonder that it's so hard to get things done." She appealed to Mr. Heffer and Bettington.

"It's *very* irritating," said Mr. Heffer. He shook hands convulsively with Felicia and Bettington.

"It's really not right that Dr. Sidebotham should be imposed on," said Miss Sidney, "when he has so many *interesting* cases. He ought not to have to waste his time on . . . dilettanti."

Miss Sidney and Mr. Heffer left together ; they were to have the pleasure of travelling in the same 'bus to Piccadilly Circus.

Felicia and Bettington had ~~not~~ begun to speak, when they heard hurried footsteps on the stairs. Mr. Heffer peered into the room.

"I'm afraid I've left my *New Statesman*," he said, and he rummaged feverishly on the divan. Having found it he twinkled away like a thin-legged dog. The door seemed to shut itself breathlessly behind him, and tension filled the room.

Felicia went back to her divan again and squatted Turk-wise, looking directly at him.

"Will you give me a cigarette?" she said in a cool, separate voice. The box was on

the divan beside her. Bettington did not notice it; he fumbled for a packet.

"They're only my beastly ones."

"It doesn't matter."

He lit the cigarette for her; it was like lighting a joss-stick before a delicate idol. She was pale. The first ash had formed on her cigarette before the silence was broken.

"I want you to read me that letter," she said.

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

He fetched the letter and sat down on his stool again, facing her. He wondered what was going on behind that outward calm; he wished she wouldn't puff at her cigarette like that, slightly turning her head and blowing the smoke sideways, refusing to let a mist come between them. But it didn't matter; nothing mattered; he had chosen his part. But his knees were trembling.

"I've read this letter already," he said. "I ought to tell you. I steamed it open before I came."

For a moment she seemed not to breathe, then she puffed her smoke sideways. "Is there anything awful in it?" she said in a small, cold voice.

"Nothing," he said.

She must keep calm under the hurt of this double violation. To have opened her letter, and then to say "Nothing" in that dully precise voice!

"It will be a bother to you to read it again?"

"Shall I try to explain why I read it?"

"I think I know."

"You can't know altogether. Boston sent me a letter at the same time, enclosing this. He didn't say anything in it, except that if you were to ask me to marry you any time in the next month, I wasn't to, for your sake, and mine and his."

"How *very* thoughtful of him!" This time he knew that she had been hurt, violated.

"It's all very complicated," he faltered. He was as remote as the Polar star; yet he must help.

"It is indeed," she said. He had never heard her speak with such a voice before; it was hard, cynical. And he could do nothing; he was so far away.

"Do you know, Bett," she said slowly, "I think men are detestable."

"I don't think I am really; and I'm sure he isn't."

The painful honesty with which he spoke jarred her. She felt that what he had said was true, but that it was a helpless, hopeless truth. She rejected it so violently that her control was swept away.

"So I'm wrong to feel that I've been terribly hurt—horribly exposed?" she cried. "Let me tell you I do, whether it's right or wrong. And I'm convinced in my very soul that you ought not to have done it—both of you."

"No, you're not wrong," he said dully. "And that's not it at all. You're perfectly right. But the fact that I've done something I ought not to have done doesn't make me detestable. I *know* whether I'm detestable or not. You know enough about me to believe me when I say: I know I'm not detestable. I'm clumsy, if you like."

"So you think it's quite all right, opening my letter? It's quite as it should be that you should discuss me behind my back? There's nothing wrong in taking some one else's advice on whether you will marry me—if I ask you? All I can say is that our notions of what's right and wrong are very different."

"I didn't say it wasn't wrong to open your letter. It was; it was detestable, if you like. But one detestable thing doesn't

make me detestable. I'm perfectly sure of that. And as for the other things, they're his look out. I didn't discuss you behind your back ; and I wasn't going to take his advice. But I'm quite sure he's not detestable either."

It was true ; it was true. She knew it. But she was hurt. She knew that also. She had never been so deeply, so irremediably wounded. That was as true as his truth. She was not going to yield to his.

"You *weren't* going to take his advice? Does that mean you are now? "

"There won't be any need. You won't ask me to marry you."

"You're very positive about what I'm going to do and not going to do."

"I don't know anything about you, Felicia. I know that you've been the most wonderful thing in my life. I thought I was in love with you. But they're not the same. I didn't realize that before. You meant a new world to me ; you still mean a new world ; you always will. But it's one I can't get into, really. I shouldn't feel safe in it. Something would always be dragging me back. I'm chained to my past.

"I don't know whether that's it really.

But I'm set apart. There's no meeting-place. Do you know the truest time in my life was one day when I lost my wind in an advance, and had to sit down on a tree-stump in the middle of a bad barrage? It sounds absolute nonsense. I have felt happier, of course, hundreds of times, with you; but it doesn't seem to have been my happiness. The other thing was."

Felicia seemed hardly to have heard. "Won't you read his letter?" she said, in her own voice.

He went on to the end of his thought. "I know you're very fond of me, as fond of me perhaps as I am of you. But you're fond of me like an old dog; and I'm fond of you like a fairy. We're quite separate. We only meet on a magic carpet, or in the country where my clock chimes. It's as though we were both angels, and angels aren't married or given in marriage, you know."

"Won't you read the letter?" Felicia wanted to stop the voice of this strange, unknown, clear-sighted Bettington from ringing tyrannously in her ears.

"If you'd like me to," he said. He read the letter slowly. It seemed to Felicia that

they were not the words of a real man. Bettington was taking them down one by one from some intermediate space between heaven and earth and putting them before her.

"Another one who has decided he's not in love with me," she laughed.

"There's something very fine in that letter, I think."

"I'm sorry. I'm not in the mood to appreciate it," she said.

"I wasn't, either, when I read it; but I feel it now."

"So you two stand there admiring each other's nobility, while I wait for the first who will degrade himself sufficiently to marry me."

"You know that's not true."

"Wouldn't it be simpler," she went on implacably, "if you both had me as a mistress, turn and turn about. You'd have so much opportunity for renunciation. You could go on admiring each other quite indefinitely."

"Don't be so bitter, Felicia. I've never known you like this before."

"I've never known you like this before; and neither of us has ever known a situa-

tion like this before. I hope not, anyhow. I haven't."

She felt unutterably exposed. In her depths she was weeping silently for excess of pain ; she had no more strength to react against it. She wanted to hide, hide, hide. On the surface she could have broken out into all the bitterness of an intolerably wounded pride ; she held it back.

Bettington saw her lips drawn tight to prevent their trembling. He must help. He stumbled over to the divan by her side, and took her hand. She turned away.

"It's all spoiled." It was like the far-off wail of a fairy ; but it came, he knew, from very near.

"Felicia, it isn't spoiled. I swear it. We're such brutes ; we're so clumsy." He put his arm round her so gently that she could hardly believe it was he. She leant back helplessly upon it.

"Oh, Bett," came her whispered cry. "Life is horrible. It can't ever be the same again."

For him it was terrible. He ached with the desire to hold her tight, never to let her go. He felt that he loved her in a way that no one else ever could, he knew an element in her

that no one else could ever know ; and surely he loved her as a woman as well. He could not tell ; at that moment he wanted only to comfort her and have the comforting of her for ever. But a hateful, hostile, cold voice whispered that she was not really his, but Boston's.

"No, it can't ever be the same, darling ; but it'll be better." A great hot lump stuck in his throat. "Ever so much better. It couldn't go on as it was."

He leaned back against the wall. Her head dropped on his shoulder, and he held her tight. For the first and last time ! This was life ! God ! The hot lump swelled. If he had known all these things before, it would have been different. You knew them when it was too late, always too late.

He stared at the beaded yellow shade of the light, while a fragment of eternity dragged slowly past. This warm being he held in his arms had nothing to do with him ; he dared not let her enter any more. He saw the rumpled divan where Miss Considine had sat, the cushions where Mr. Heffer had rummaged for the *New Statesman*, the cavernous shadow of the arm-chair where Miss Sidney had jangled her bag and flashed her green beads.

He saw still more clearly the emptiness of his own rooms, echoing the forlorn, silvery chime; he thought that his chair, his carpet, his box, his candlesticks did not know what had happened to him and could never know; and he felt that the last bond that held him to life was broken. He stared at the ruin aghast.

"What will you do about the cottage?" she whispered.

"I . . . don't . . . know . . ." The lump was choking him.

"You're not crying, Bett?"

"No . . . I'm . . . not . . ."

He bent his head and kissed her on the cheek.

"I'll go now," he said.

It seemed to Felicia that he slipped away before his words were ended.

CHAPTER X

THE ENCOUNTER

“Des cendres d’un phœnix s’engendre, dict on, un ver, et puis un aultre phœnix ; ce second phœnix, qui peult imaginer qu’il ne soit aultre que le premier ?”—
Montaigne.

BETTINGTON left Felicia with a plan fixed in his mind. He must see Boston without delay. In that one point all the lines of necessity converged and swiftly met. He must see him for Felicia’s sake ; she must not be left as he was, forsaken. The image of a weeping fairy haunted his mind, and the thought of his own cruel clumsiness gave him no peace. It must be repaired and she must be comforted. He must see him for Boston’s own sake ; he must tell him what he had done ; that he recognized beyond appeal that Felicia was his. He must see him, finally, for himself ; their friendship was the one thing that might remain to him, but it must be purified and consolidated now.

It was nearly midnight when he reached his rooms. The rain was dying gently away ; the freshness of an earlier dawn had renewed the air. If only he need not pause, but could go straight on to Boston now, without the foolish interruption of night, for this was the beginning, not the end of a day ! He looked up the trains ; there was not one would take him there by breakfast-time. He would bicycle then. As he dragged his bicycle from the cellar up the narrow stairs, he made a great noise in the after-midnight silence. It could not be helped ; it had to be done. He spent half an hour mending a puncture. He would start at half-past five.

The faithful alarm-clock woke him. With a pocketful of biscuits he took the road to the north. The smooth streets were flooded with a lake of cool silence. He could hear the crisp, crackling murmur of his tyres, as though he were riding swiftly, swiftly, over a carpet of pine-needles through a mountain forest. The sound comforted him ; it was in tune with his errand. He was riding into a new life. Everything must be clean, the cuts and the joins alike. If they were, there would still be a place for him in the lives of these two people whom he loved.

He did love them—there was no doubt about that—loved them as never before. Now that he had wrenched himself apart, now that he was climbing to his mountain, he could see things that had been hidden, just as he had seen why he and Felicia could never come together. Just as plainly he saw that the fineness he admired in Boston was maintained in a trembling balance by a weakness as subtle. This unstable element had always eluded him. It was as though his sense had been too blunted ; now it had become acute, and he could distinguish overtones. The overtone of Boston's letter was too tremulous ; it was the courage of a sick man. Boston needed Felicia and Felicia needed him. "Thy need is greater than mine ;" it was like Sir Philip Sidney.

He felt almost gay. You couldn't help accepting your destiny with a smile, when you knew it. It was the knowing it that was so hard. His destiny was all of a piece with his isolated, terrifying childhood, which, unfitting him for some things that he had dreamed, had fitted him for others that he had not dreamed. It was ordained that he should be solitary and find his strength in loneliness.

He was going too fast, whispered a voice. Life was not so simple, and it could not be made simple by any denial, however heroic. There were women, and other things besides. He listened, but he scarcely heard. Whatever difficulties the future might bring, this was simple and clear and necessary. He was not being heroic at all. He had merely seen, or felt, a little deeper into himself and was obeying.

He was determined not to be heroic. That would be a lie and fatal. He would hate himself, and they would see through it and hate him. He was going to stick to his life as he had planned it; he was a person who would always find something to do with all his might. Above all, there must be no gesture. There wasn't much temptation, really.

The hard pedalling in the cool of the morning was a physical delight. The strong rhythm of his taut body as he rose steadily on the hills exhilarated him, and he took pleasure in holding himself at the precise point at which he could put out all his strength and keep every movement in control. He felt affectionate towards the old bicycle that conspired with him. It must be ten years

now since he bought it. He remembered so vividly the effort to get the eight guineas clear. It seemed little enough now. There were even occasions when he was paid eight guineas for a single article. They were rare, of course ; but it had happened once or twice in the last year. Could it be that he was getting prosperous ? He thought of his bank balance, still on the wrong side of a hundred pounds, and decided that it was improbable. Still, there was a change. Eight guineas was at least a familiar conception nowadays ; then it had been extraordinary. Why ten years ago a twenty-pound scholarship had made all the difference to him ! Without it London University would have been impossible.

It seemed to him that this vast difference in the meaning of eight guineas ought to be the outward sign of a vast change within himself. He remembered he had thought then that to have a regular article in a newspaper was a condition ineffable, belonging to another and a strange order of being. He had passed into it without noticing ; he could find very little change.

Perhaps he had become more solid, more content to be himself. But hardly more

than that. He couldn't say even that the war had changed him greatly ; it had crystallized elements that were fluid in him by a kind of slow pressure ; it certainly had not been a shock to him. He couldn't see that the horrors of war were so very much worse than the horrors of life. They were more concentrated, and the compensations were more concentrated also.

He rode on, thinking dispersedly to no conclusions. Beneath his thought was an awareness, unfamiliar and bracing, of himself as an isolated atom, complete in itself, acknowledging no relation, yet being borne swiftly by force of attraction to an alien centre. It seemed that he was not going to Boston at all, but rather to some centre of disturbance of which Boston was at most the symbol. There would be an impact, and then the atom called Bettington would fly off into space again, but on his own path still and with an undiminished velocity. This underlying awareness had almost the force of a law ; it governed him and gave him strength. His legs moved in obedience to it. It seemed to him that he was riding faster than he had ever ridden before. Even his shortwindedness was in abeyance.

Boston was just sitting down to breakfast. Although Bettington had left his watch behind, and had never even glanced at a clock, he was not surprised that he had come on the stroke of his intended hour ; it was merely part of the scheme of things. It was part of the scheme of things that Boston should not be surprised either. He smiled at Bettington and asked him if he had had breakfast. Bettington thought that he could have ridden all the way for that smile alone ; yet he had expected it.

" Mrs. Williams hasn't seen you, has she ? " said Boston.

" I don't think so."

" We won't ring for any more food. There's plenty for two here. It's best not to be disturbed. The slop-basin will do for a cup."

Boston filled the basin with tea, pushed over the warm plate and the knife and fork to Bettington. " Take half," he said, pointing to the eggs and bacon. Then he took the dish to himself.

" Well ? " he said.

Bettington laughed and repeated " Well ? " Then they laughed together.

" It's all right," said Bettington. " Quite all right."

"Did you hate my letter?"

"At first. It was a terrible disappointment. And I opened the other one."

"That was quite right. One was meaningless without the other. But then . . . I wasn't sure of myself."

"I went straight off to her. I meant to ask her to marry me there and then."

"But you didn't. I knew you wouldn't. If it had been anybody else but you . . ."

"Then you had more faith in me than I had. I *really* meant to, you know. But I had a kind of revelation, on top of a 'bus. . . . You must marry her, Boston."

"Yes, I must. I ought to, and I want to. But just because I feel that, I feel it may be too late. She may hate me, now. She's entitled to. If I were her, I should detest myself. But then she's finer. I put my hope in that. And then," he went on, "there are moments when it's not a question of hopes at all, when it seems necessary and inevitable. But I can't quite trust them. One doesn't get rid of one's habits in a day. And then the very feeling frightens me sometimes. It's like being driven to put out into an unknown sea, on a strange ship with a captain you've never seen before. I

sway forwards and backwards. I know it's my chance of salvation ; but then something tells me the struggle will only begin, and I'm afraid, in all sorts of curious ways, Bett,—all sorts of ways. Let's go out," he said abruptly.

They slipped out by the side door and the wood-shed. Bettington wanted to hear what Boston had to say. He had come meaning to say much, to explain much, himself ; but he felt now that all his saying had been conveyed to Boston by his coming. His part was done, and it remained for him to listen. They were out of sight of the inn before Boston began again.

"I often wondered why you believed in me, Bett. It was everything to me, though I didn't know it. I must pretty well have lived off it, really, these last few years ; but I had a haunting feeling that you deceived yourself and that there was nothing there. It's so easy to take in clever people, that I wondered whether it had become so much a habit that I could take in some one who was something more than clever.

"I've discovered that there was something there. The thing I am now, or I want to be now, is the thing you believed in. That's why I wasn't surprised at your coming ;

that's why I took it so calmly. But, man, don't think I don't know what it cost you. I'm still the bloodsucker. It's as though I had to take one last great draught of your blood to set me going on my journey."

"Perhaps it didn't cost me so much as you think," said Bettington.

"Far more likely that it cost you more than you know. Don't deceive yourself, Bett. You're in a kind of ecstasy. You have to get into a kind of ecstasy before you can bear to have your hand chopped off. But still, it is a hand, and it won't grow again. You'll come to hate me yet, and I shall deserve it."

Bettington shook his head, smiling.

"I think you *ought* to hate me even. I've used you."

"Perhaps I shall, then. I don't feel like it now. Perhaps in my own way I've used you. But isn't that what friends are for?"

"Yes . . . The difference is that you've used me like a friend—though I don't see that you've used me at all—and I've used you like . . . something different."

"I don't see that," Bettington persisted. "Don't make it too complicated. What are you getting at, really? You could no more

help recognizing her as yours than I could help recognizing that she wasn't mine."

"If she had asked you to marry her, what would you have said?"

"How can I tell? If you'd asked me the question a week ago, I'd have said 'Yes'; it's no good asking me now. I hope I'd have said 'No,' but I can't tell."

"Well," said Boston, "I'm sure you would have said 'No.'"

"I wish I could believe it."

"It's true, and since it's true, and since in my heart I felt it was true, it was quite wrong of me to write you that letter, quite wrong of me to write to her. That's as certain to me now as anything. It was my miserable longing not to be cast off. I must be creating a stir in some one's consciousness still."

"I thought there was something fine in the letter," persisted Bettington.

"That's because you were friends with me."

"I don't think so."

"You will."

"Very well."

"No, Bett, I'm as certain as that I'm walking here that those letters were horrible, a last vomiting of the old Adam in his death agonies—the lowest thing I've ever done."

"They brought me here, anyhow."

"It wasn't the good in them; it was the good in you."

"Rubbish."

"You know, Bett, it's strange to me that you don't know these things. I have a queer feeling that you know them all the while, and that something keeps you from acknowledging them."

Bettington shook his head.

"Are you sure?"

"Well, if you want to know, I did think there was something fine in your letter to her, but something weak as well. Nothing more. I couldn't have told which was which; they seemed both the same. As for your letter to me, I can't say. It hurt me; that's all."

"Then why did you come here to say that I must marry Felicia? You believe it, don't you?"

"Absolutely. I don't know . . . It was a mix-up of all kinds of things," said Bettington reluctantly.

"Tell me."

"Must I really?"

"I ask you."

"Well . . . Oh, lord! I may get it all

wrong. It was all kinds of things. The simplest was that I wanted to get the wrench over. Just like having a tooth out. Have it out now, don't wait for gas; have it over and done with. But that wasn't the most important." He thought for a moment. "It was your letter, really. I could never have written it. I felt as though——" He paused. "As though you'd twined tendrils round her and into her that I should never even have thought possible; as though you made demands on her that I could never make. Yes, that was it chiefly. I think that if I hadn't known you, I should have hated you; but I did know you, and I didn't hate you. . . . And, coming out of that, I realized how separate I was, like a frozen drop of water."

"I see," said Boston, musing.

"Besides, I didn't know what had happened between you both."

"Oh, I talked about myself, as usual. I believed I was being honest."

"Well, you were, weren't you?"

"In a way, yes. But there are queer ways of being honest. If a man has a lustful fit and tries to get hold of the first woman he comes across, he's being honest, in a way.

A damned bad way. If a man goes about saying he's miserable and wretched and weak, and please pity him, he's being honest too, in a way. And that's a damned bad way, too. It's not so easy to know when you're honest. It's no use saying we are what we are. I always had a suspicion that was no good. I can say I generally had the decency to keep myself to myself. But the truth I've had to discover is that, instead of being what we are, if we aren't something better, we're nothing at all. Just an emptiness that fills with gangrene and festers. Much worse than nothing, in fact. There's no abiding place. Either you get better or you get worse, finer or grosser. You have to choose. If you don't choose, you've chosen more finally than ever.

"It doesn't sound very much, I know, and yet it's all I've got to show for ten years of my life; and that's all due to the last fortnight. The crisis of a long disease. Now I'm clothed and in my right mind, but convalescent, very convalescent.

"Now you see the difference between us, don't you? You were born with all this somehow; it's an instinct with you. I don't in the least know what you are after; but you

are after something. You never stop. You never have any temptation to be 'honest.' It would be like stopping a stream to see what made it a stream."

"Isn't that just an accident?" said Bettington.

"What does that matter? It goes deep enough."

"But how deep? What you say about my not stopping is true; but it's not so certain that it's the same as going on. It often seems to me that my life is only a desperate fight away from my childhood. I had a miserable time when I was small. Nothing melodramatic. I was loved and adored; but it was dark—dark and grimy. Perhaps I'm not doing anything more than claw my way out of prison. I'm rushing away, not towards. There's too much of the set-teeth attitude about me, I feel sometimes. Not now, though," he added.

"It was the other way with me," said Boston. "As far as I've fought at all, it's been to live back in my childhood. That's far more deadly."

"I've always thought," said Bettington, "that if you've had a childhood worth living back in, you have something that can never

be replaced, a kind of stored-up richness that you can never get in any other way. Without it, you become prematurely hardened; you can never receive things into yourself again."

"I don't think there's very much in it. Take me. I've often felt that my capacity for happiness, even more my capacity for love, was used up when I was small; that I reached a kind of pinnacle then, and all the rest of the time has been slowly slipping down from it. There's something paralysing in a perfectly happy childhood. I can't believe many people have them. I could never have escaped the paralysis by myself, and until yesterday I should have said that I could never escape it by anyone else. I've changed my mind. Once it begins, it gathers everything to itself. Every spring seems to rust; every action seems to be false. You always act in a reaction from doing nothing; it's all galvanic, like a demonstration arranged by the will. There's plenty of the set-teeth attitude about me. I don't see very much of it in you."

"I'm simpler," said Bettington.

"That's only another way of saying you've less paralysis. All living things are simple.

D'you remember Dostoevsky saying somewhere he was much more afraid of a simple man than he was of a complex man? He meant it, with all his soul. Why, in a terribly small way, it's true of me. I'm afraid of you even, Bett. I always feel that you may say or do something that I shall know to be right, though I can't understand why it's right. And I'm afraid of myself as I've never been afraid of myself before—only because I'm becoming simpler. I feel that I'm beginning to gather myself together for a leap; and the strange thing is, it's not the leap that frightens me half so much as the gathering together. I'm losing all kinds of things that I thought inseparable from me. You don't know how frightening that is. If you had a past like mine, though, it would terrify you to feel it slipping through your fingers. When it's been so much of you as mine has been, you wonder whether there's anything left. Simplicity is a queer thing. And one seems to have a glimpse of it only by accident.

"It's very odd," continued Boston, "but ever since I came away from London I've been absolutely haunted by bits of the New Testament, just phrases. It began on the very afternoon I came away. And I

don't suppose I've looked at a New Testament since I was a boy. But now, if ever I feel that there's something I have to do, a vague feeling that I can't crystallize, I find that there's a phrase from the New Testament that fits it. I don't mean an apt quotation at all. It's much more curious than that. A phrase seems to be lurking about somewhere in me, waiting for the moment to appear and reveal to me what I mean—what *I* mean. Take that one: 'He that loseth his life for my sake shall save it.' I've had that on the brain, obsessing me, for nearly a fortnight now."

He stopped abruptly, and gave a quick, sideways glance at Bettington. He was walking with his hands in his trouser pockets, his eyes intent on the path before him, his large dark-haired head bent forward as though it might overbalance him. Boston had a sharp pang of doubt whether he was listening at all: he seemed so rapt away in his own reverie.

"You don't think I'm being childish?"

Bettington's head swung round as though on a spring. Boston could see the amazement in his eyes.

"Good lord, no! Go on, go on." His eyes returned to the path again.

"I don't know why it came up, but it did. On the Sunday afternoon when you were coming to tea. It worried me. I knew it was important in some way, and yet it didn't mean anything, didn't mean anything to me. For days and days—I can see now—I was trying to find my meaning for it; and the nearer I got, the more I rebelled against it. Most of the time you were here I was rebelling, and the more I rebelled the more nearly I saw that the whole meaning of the thing for me was in the *losing*.

"One can't give an account of these things. They happen in the very borderland of one's mind. One doesn't know what one is doing. When I say I was rebelling, I don't mean I knew I was rebelling. Knowledge only comes afterwards; it's only a recognition of what has happened unknown to it. That's the marvel of these phrases from the New Testament; they seem to give one a knowledge that is more than knowledge, a knowledge that is absolutely prophetic. D'you see what I mean? It sounds complicated, but it's simple really."

"Go on," said Bettington.

"You see: I had this phrase in my mind, occupying it whenever I didn't deliberately

think of other things. Whenever I stopped it came back to the centre like the bubble in a spirit level. I couldn't grasp it. It was like an important, mysterious riddle that I had to solve and could see no way of solving; and then again it looked as if it had nothing at all to do with me. Yet all the while the effort to solve it was going on down below, unknown to me; but even when I was conscious of the efforts, I didn't see the least connexion between them and the riddle.

“That isn't easy to explain. But listen. When you two came—just before you two came—I was trying to screw myself up to . . . surrender to you, to give myself up to you, not to be separate from you. I tried very hard, very hard indeed; but I couldn't. Instead, I hated you; I wanted you to go away and not disturb me any more; I wanted to be left alone for ever. I felt that I had done all I could and it was no good. I had run up against my destiny. I longed for you to go in order that I could stop banging my head against the wall.

“But the queer thing is I didn't recognize the faintest connexion between all this and my riddle; they were utterly separate. And yet it was all nothing but a desperate and

feverish rebellion against the meaning of the riddle. It's as clear as daylight to me now. And even when I went out that morning with Felicia and my rebellion reached a kind of extreme, when I refused to lose the least tiny atom of myself, but stood jealously heaping the smallest fragments together and saying to her, over and over again, 'This is what I am, this is what I *am*,' until she turned away from it in horror—even then I didn't know. Even when she turned away, and I nearly collapsed in terror of the ghastly thing that would hang about my neck until I died; when I heard her say simply the thing I had been saying in my own lying way, 'There is *no* escape,' and my bones turned to water—even then I didn't know."

Boston stopped. After a moment he said: "Those last two days were hysteria—pure hysteria."

"I had a feeling that we were all drunk," said Bettington.

"The day after you'd gone, I was," said Boston.

"In those two days," he went on, "I'd seen the meaning of the riddle. It was quite plain. I had to *lose* my life; it was the only hope. At the same time that I saw that, I

saw also that it was quite impossible for me to lose my life. Mine wasn't the kind of life that lets itself be lost. It makes one a little hysterical to see a thing like that."

"What happened?" said Bettington.

"I told you I was drunk the next day. I didn't do it on purpose. I went driving with Williams. I gave up the whole thing. I couldn't lose myself; but I could bury myself. I made up my mind to live here in the country. I was almost happy. The next morning—to think it's barely twenty-four hours ago!—I wrote those letters. In the afternoon I went to tea with a woman called Mrs. Kennington. I'd heard of her before; I met her when I was coming away from the station.

"It isn't that I don't want to tell you what happened. I simply can't; I don't know. Except that I tortured her—not in the same way as I tortured Felicia. There was something about it that wasn't horrible, that couldn't have been otherwise."

"But what happened to *you*?" said Bettington. "Something has happened."

"Oh . . . I saw that one mustn't use people, that's all. It's forbidden."

"But what has that got to do with losing your life and saving it?"

"Everything . . . for me."

Bettington thought over it. It meant that Boston knew he must not use Felicia. He wanted to have it all reduced to personal terms; what did it mean for Felicia and Boston, and himself? It meant that instead of using Felicia Boston would . . . lose his life to her? Why, he couldn't do that himself, and how could Boston do it? And yet he seemed sure—sure of his own path as Bettington was of his.

"Can you do it?" he asked.

"I've *got* to," said Boston.

They walked on in silence. Yesterday's thunderstorm had made the ground alive beneath their feet. Bettington felt sad. It seemed to him that at the moment when he knew his friend, his friend was embarking on a great journey without him, a journey more dangerous perhaps, but far more wonderful than his own. It was too much. To have to say two farewells at the same moment was more than he could bear, more than he ought to bear; and besides, there was a strange envy in his heart. He must confess it.

"I envy you . . . old man. I can't help it; I try not to."

"I wonder you don't hate me as well."

"No, I don't hate you . . . I don't think I do. Why should I? I don't feel you're taking Felicia away from me. The more I think about her, the more I know she wasn't mine. But envy, yes. I'm afraid it goes pretty deep, too." After a minute he added, "And I feel you're deserting me. I feel that all the while you've been talking to me you've been stripping yourself like a runner, and I shall be left only with your clothes in my arms. Well, it can't be helped."

And Bettington could not smother a spark of hope that something might happen still to prevent the voyage, simply in order that he might not be left alone. His separateness, however much he believed in it, could not satisfy him; it was true, but it was cold, very cold. He felt like a man who comes to after an operation. The trance had dissolved away; the pain had begun.

"Who is this Mrs. Kennington?" he asked.

"She lost her only boy in the war. It changed her completely. Now she lives quite alone—no, her husband lives with her—and she doesn't believe in God. She used to keep the post office. She's a stranger here, really. You'd know it if you saw her." Boston stopped, looked round the country,

and pointed. "You see that big clump of trees? You see where it's divided by the road?"

"Yes."

"Well, just under the left-hand clump there's a little bit of white wall. D'you see? That's her house."

"You've been inside?"

"Yes, I had tea there."

"Of course, you told me." There was a long pause.

"You seem to think it's all plain sailing for me now?" said Boston.

"Isn't it?"

Boston did not reply. Sometimes it appeared to him simple; sometimes he thought he was in a world of dream. But the next step was plain; he must see Felicia and ask her.

"You *are* in love with her?" asked Bettington. The question surprised them both.

"Since the letter I've never thought of it in that way. I don't suppose I did even then. I feel she's tremendously important to me; that our lives are involved for ever."

"I've thought that, you know," said Bettington, "and thought wrong."

"Have you really thought that?"

"If you mean only what you say, I certainly have."

"That your two lives were involved for ever?"

"Yes," said Bettington stubbornly.

"But you *can't* have done. You couldn't be standing here now saying it; you couldn't have let her go."

"Are you quite sure you know what I *can* do?"

"But, man, you couldn't take your own life and strangle it with your hands."

"Are you sure?" And Bettington felt that he was asking not Boston but himself; and neither he nor Boston could reply.

"Surely you feel more than that," Bettington said dully after a silence.

"How can I feel more? No human being could feel more."

"He could feel something about herself." Some shrill-voiced being entered into Bettington and took possession. "Look here, this is all very well, but where is *she*? I know her; you don't. I've known her five years. The sense of her is in my very bones. I know her tread on the stairs among ten thousand; I've never made a mistake. I know her shoes, her gloves, her coats, her

voice over the telephone. I know the way she puts the cups on the table and the way she makes tea ; the way her eyebrow goes up when she wrinkles her forehead ; the way she holds a pen. And I know what it is to hear her say, ' Oh, Bett ! '. You've got to feel something about all that, you know." He could hear the snarl in his own voice.

No, he couldn't go through it all again ; he must not. He had torn it all out of himself. This was only the pain speaking.

Boston had stopped dead. Bettington stood still, turned away, with his eyes fixed on a tall thistle. Suddenly he held out his hand, the strange, red, bony thing that was part of him ; it seemed to hang unaccountably in the air.

" Don't listen to it," he said. " It's the last burst of *my* old Adam. Perhaps, for all you say, he dies as hard as yours."

Boston took his hand.

" But what you say is true ! Surely it's true ! Isn't it true ? "

" Not really. Only the facts are true. It's like your letter to her."

They turned towards the inn again. Bettington felt that he had violated a sworn oath with himself. It was hard not to do it, but

it was unpardonable to have done it. He was degraded by what he had done.

"It's all lies," he said eagerly. "Put it out of your mind."

"But it's true that all those things *are* in your bones."

"In my bones, but not in my soul." What was his soul then? Did it exist—this place where Felicia was not? Was he a hero after all?

"They're rather hard to distinguish, aren't they?" said Boston. "Bones and soul."

"Not really. Hard to say, but easy to feel."

A long silence followed. In it Bettington faced and accepted one simple fact which, in spite of all his resolution, he had not faced before. He had determined his life without reference to Felicia; he had never so much as dreamed that she might change it. She was the pinnacle, but to his building; the embodiment, but of his dream; she graced his plans, but she did not make them; she fitted his design, but she had no part in the creation; she was the fairy, but for his cottage. He wondered whether she had ever felt it when she praised his purchases and clasped her hands at his future. Of course she had. What a blind fool he had been! And yet, even

now, he would not change his plans ; they were unalterable, the core of his being.

"There's all the difference in the world between bones and soul," he said.

Boston seemed not to listen ; he was answering his own questions.

"Yes," he said. "I am in love with her. It may not be what you call being in love, but it will last longer ; it will last for ever. You must take it or leave it."

"I take it," said Bettington gaily.

"Very well, then. . . . But stick to what you say !" Boston's voice had completely changed ; it was cold, contemptuous, angry.

Bettington was stung by the threat. He deserved it, but still. . . . He was unutterably wounded ; nerves that he had never known were bare and quivering. And he must say nothing—nothing, or the last thread that held them would snap, and he would creep off and die, like a pariah. He felt that he was sinking into unknown depths of pain and degradation. The rasping, threatening note of Boston's voice jarred and reverberated on.

Well, he must receive it to the uttermost ; he gave way to his own pain. "It is my brother hath done this." And that barb also he turned in his heart. Time oozed out

in heavy, stagnant drops. He remembered that he came that morning in triumph and confidence, with a sense of victory ; now he was quivering like a beaten dog. And that barb also he turned in his heart. He followed Boston dully over the stiles ; he saw his own hands on the topmost rail and loathed them. He saw a man with a braced body riding boldly, like a knight, through the cool of the morning, with a generous gesture in his heart. No, it was more than he could bear. Something within him was weeping and moaning that it was undeserved, unfair, untrue. He took the weeping thing in his two hands and strangled it.

Then, after an eternity of desolation and death, he seemed to put out a pale, wavering, thread-like shoot into the cold silence that held them together still. Out of his nothingness a faint living thing was born. A tremulous, shaken being came to birth, bathed and purified in the ice-cold silence. It rose and grew like a pale flower on a too slender stalk, preserved by the windless silence alone. If that were broken, he felt, in a strange suspense of fear, the stem also would break.

No word was spoken between them. Shortly before one o'clock they entered the inn.

CHAPTER XI

FELICIA'S RETURN

"What would you have?"

"Something, and scarce so much: nothing indeed."

FELICIA slept where Bettington had left her, on the divan, like a sick person whose chance of rest depends on her not being moved. She woke into the rain-cooled morning long before anyone was stirring in the flats. Her light was still burning. She lay still, trying to gather the threads of her life, of herself, together. What was it had happened? What was it had changed? She could answer nothing before she had bathed; she felt tear-stained through and through.

She bathed in her bedroom and looked at herself in her long glass, standing sideways and turning to glance over her shoulder. That was hers, anyhow. Looking at her firm compact body and her slender round arms, she felt that she belonged to herself again;

and when she sat down in her little kitchen and looked out upon the familiar lines of grey roofs, while her kettle boiled, it seemed not at all impossible that she should be whole again.

And yet, she felt, she had to make a choice. She tried to persuade herself that her work was all-important. This teaching of dancing to children was something into which she could put the whole of herself: she saw the children whom she taught grown into vivid, beautiful beings, and their children after them. The great vista began in her; she, so small, would have done so much. Yet the vision did not light a spark in her. Indeed, she disliked even the thought of going to the school that afternoon. There was something preposterous and futile about dancing.

At all events there was something far more important standing immovable before her that she could not avoid. She wanted to put it away, to push it aside with her two hands, and wait for something to happen. There must be some quite overwhelming impulse that could not be denied. You did not decide these things; they were decided for you. Yet to confess that was a degradation. Her plans and resolutions had come to so little that she must assert herself now.

She was willing to give up everything, to suffer everything to be changed, on condition that she did it with her whole self, complete as she was now, when even her own blue egg-cups into which she put her two brown eggs were a definite part of her.

She tapped her egg with her bone spoon. Did she want to be married? She had regained her balance after that morning with Boston with an effort; but so much that she felt she need not go away. And then, when Bettington came last night, she knew she had been deceiving herself. She had been waiting for a letter. All the evening she had mistrusted herself, had been uncertain and afraid, and at the end, when Bettington had talked so strangely, her last defences had gone. It was too precarious to be endured. She could go away, of course; but she did not want to go away. The very ache of her longing to hide warned her that it was no use hiding. Something had to be settled. Yes, she was going to get married.

It must be marriage. She was sick of all the liaisons of the people whom she knew, sick of Miss Sidney's "I suppose you've heard . . .", sick of her own desire to know and her weariness when she knew; these

monotonous people who were Bohemian without conviction, or who prided themselves on restoring the manners of the eighteenth century; these commonplace men who tried to kiss her and said "You're a cold little beast," or "a cold little devil,"—always something to suggest that they were being tortured by passion.

She hated this commonplace promiscuity that masqueraded as liberty, as courageousness, as art. A slimy, glittering snail-track threaded through all the society she knew, from young Lady Ormerod, with her money and her family, down to the latest Jew who had begun to creep from the Slade School to the Café Royal. She belonged to another race. "I believe in marriage," said Lady Ormerod. "Of course, I know Henry has mistresses; I know who they are. . . ." Felicia had felt sorry for the pretty girl with her frizzed blonde hair and her cynical chatter. She wanted to say, "Do you call that really believing in marriage?" But what was the good? Probably she was as happy as she could be.

Whatever she did, she was not going to slide like the rest of them. If she couldn't have what she wanted, she would go without

anything at all. She wondered what it was she did want. It was easier to say the words "real marriage" than to know what they meant, much easier to believe in them than to know what you believed in. Last night she had felt for the first time that she could be truly married to Bett, at the very moment that he was telling her, with a conviction she knew to be certain and a truth she could hardly doubt, that it was impossible. If he had only been like that a fortnight ago he wouldn't have thought it impossible; she was sure of that. She was sure also that she would have refused to marry him then.

It was since he had discovered about Boston that he had changed. He had felt that she was being dragged towards Boston. It was not true. She had had a moment of immense pity for Boston, that was all. Now she had built herself up against it once more. You didn't become truly married out of pity. Neither could you go on finding out what true marriage was by merely discovering what it was not. Oh, it was no use thinking about it.

But that was only letting them decide. How dare Bett be so certain about it when

she herself wasn't certain at all? How dare Boston write her a letter like that? She wanted to deny that she had had any impulse to rescue him at all. She couldn't. There was the letter on the table before her—"Your going made a tremendous difference to me, more difference, I think, than any single action by any human being has made to me for years." She felt again the touch of the spear-grass on her palms. No! She couldn't go on thinking about it like this.

She went out into the street to buy fruit and cigarettes. In spite of all her thinking she felt proud and happy, and she walked the longest way back, by the Embankment. In her new thin red tweed coat and skirt, her fine linen ruffle, she felt as though she were married already.

A large grey motor-car was at the door of the flats. The driver touched his cap to her. She nodded graciously, not knowing in the least who he was.

Over the top of her big arm-chair she saw a spreading grey hat. It was Miss Considine.

"Good heavens, Jimmy, what on earth are you out so early for?"

"It's that psycho-analysis."

"What!"

"I woke up early this morning, and ever since I've been trying to make up my mind whether to go to Dr. . . ." She paused.

"Sidebotham," said Felicia.

"I am perfectly certain," said Miss Con-sidine dreamily, "that if I do go, that's exactly what will happen always. 'How *do* you do, Dr. . . .', and he'll have to say it."

"Is that what makes it so hard to decide?"

"Partly. Do you think Miss Sidney was annoyed with me?"

"She called you a dilettante when you'd gone."

"Do you think I'm a—dilettante?"

"Of course not. But what have you come for, really?"

"That's what makes people appear dilettanti, asking those point-blank questions. I don't really know, quite."

"It wasn't about Dr. Sidebotham, anyhow, was it, Jimmy?"

"No—o, it wasn't about that. Don't press me. I'll tell you. There were three things. When I woke up I felt I would like to see you. I hardly had a glimpse of you last night. Then . . . I thought you might like a ride in my new car. Then . . . well, I'm worried about you."

"Worried about *me*?"

"Yes," Miss Considine said quite definitely, "about you. How charming you look! And that frill and tucker make you so *rangée*. I've never seen you like that before. You don't look a bit like a boy."

"But ought I?"

"You very often do. . . . Who was the black-haired man who came in late last night? Mr. Bettington. I've got the name. I've seen him before somewhere."

"At the theatre? He goes regularly."

"Is he in love with you, Lissy?"

"He came here last night especially to tell me he wasn't."

"Oh . . . it's settled, then."

"Settled? What do you mean?"

"If they come to tell you that, they're in a very bad way. It's really a step beyond asking you to marry them."

"Jimmy! I don't believe you know anything about it, anyhow."

"It's a pity," went on Miss Considine, unperturbed. "A great pity. I was just thinking he would suit me. So quiet. And you can see he has a sense of humour. And then he's got that funny face, like . . . well, what is it like? How nice it would be,

waking up in the morning and wondering what it was like. I should like to rumple his hair. You have. Doesn't he look charming? "

"I haven't."

"Lissy! I'm perfectly certain you have. Why, you couldn't possibly be in the same room with him for half an hour without doing it. My fingers positively ached to. Who's the man in that Dickens book? " Miss Considine's forehead gathered in a little frown, then smoothed again as she bent her head back. She seemed always to be yielding herself up to ineffable embraces with half-closed eyes. She gave a little smile. "But, of course you don't read Dickens," she said to her invisible lover.

"Don't be silly, Jimmy. It was I who told you to read the book."

"What was his name? " Miss Considine was still talking to the unknown.

"Tommy Traddles? "

"Yes, yes. . . . What a charming person he was. I feel I could have been very happy with Tommy." Again she seemed to float away into an idyll.

Felicia stood looking down at her. What a very good thing it was she had so much

money. She was worth every penny of it. She did nothing ; she knew nothing, and yet she was the most positive being Felicia knew. She was amazingly generous, and she always knew when to give and what to give. She floated with her natural, lazy indifference, through an intricate social life, making the conversation of clever people sound peculiarly hollow and the small talk of the stupid peculiarly inane. And it was very hard to decide whether she was not beautiful at all or perfectly beautiful. Her heavy oval face expressed nothing or everything.

"Of course, if you haven't ruffled Mr. Bettington's hair, and you haven't felt any longing to——"

"What then? "

"Don't be so impatient, Lissy. In that case, I was going to say, possibly I'm mistaken, and he's not your man ; in that case, also, I don't see why I shouldn't have him."

"But he'd never be able to make you out."

"That wouldn't matter. He'd very quickly find some simple rule of three that would work quite well. I don't know. I'm inclined to think I'm more use if I don't marry. I feel I was made to be the incredible god-mother. I'm much more certain about you.

You ought to marry. It's a pity it can't be Tommy. But surely you've got some one else. I always think of you as simply besieged by a queue at the stage-door. No, that's not it. Being serenaded by a number of young men with lovely voices. It must be very difficult to choose a man by his voice. . . ."

She opened her eyes and looked at Felicia. "I could marry you myself," she said.

"Thank you, Mr. Considine." Felicia kissed her hand. "I think you might be more helpful, though."

"You don't help yourself, my darling. Fancy letting Tommy go!"

"I told you I didn't let him go. He went."

"It's the same thing exactly."

In spite of herself Felicia was shaken. "I'll tell you what he said," she went on. "He said it was quite impossible for us ever to be really in love with each other, because I should love him like an old dog and he'd love me like a fairy. We should never meet."

"Did he say that, really?"

"Could I invent it?"

"It's just the kind of thing you *would* invent. And then he went away?"

"Yes."

Miss Considine sat silent for a moment, fingering a heavy amber chain.

"I saw a pair of pale red shoes at Pouncett's that might be even better for you than those grey ones. Let's go."

They sat in the big grey car. It purred up Sloane Street. Miss Considine put her hand on Felicia's arm and felt the texture of her coat.

"This is new, isn't it?"

"My mother paid. I had more or less ordered it. So I took her there yesterday and coaxed her."

"It's lovely stuff." As Miss Considine caressed it, she seemed once more to float away.

Felicia wanted her to say something about Bettington. At that moment she could have resigned it all into her hands. But to resign all meant to tell all, and that was impossible. She waited in silence, a little envious of the soft grey car. Perhaps, if she had all the luxuries, she would not be worried like this; perhaps, if one lived like Miss Considine, it was easier to keep decisions away, decisions and desires.

"Have you never been in love. Jimmy?"

Miss Considine slowly descended.

"That's very hard to answer. You never used to ask these point-blank questions," she said reproachfully. "If I have, I've never been in so far that I couldn't get out again."

"Float out again," Felicia corrected.

"I go so quickly. I've married myself to innumerable men before I've even heard their names. The names are generally disappointing, I find."

"Bettington?" said Felicia.

"It's not what it should be . . . quite." There was silence.

"No, I've never really been in love; and I'm positive no one has ever really been in love with me. I'm too big."

"But you aren't so *very* big."

"No—o, but the nicest men like small women. It's very curious."

"Nonsense!"

"There you are, Lissy! You won't believe me when I tell you the simplest fact. I'm sure there's a reason for it. Perhaps even the nicest men like to have a sense of power; perhaps it's necessary to the love of the nicest men that they should be able to give one little names; perhaps they have to feel

protective. Any one of those reasons will do. If they're all true. . . ."

"I've never known you so philosophical, Jimmy."

"It's a subject I've thought about," said Miss Considine in her dreamiest manner.

They bought the shoes at Pouncett's. It was the only pair, sent over from Paris as a pattern.

"I thought they would fit you," murmured Miss Considine, with the unemphatic satisfaction of one used to being right. "Don't take them off."

Felicia admired her peach-coloured shoes against the silver-grey cushions of the car. They were so unexpected and so beautiful. Like the glass slipper, they seemed to lead her tripping away into another world, where she also found it easy to be indifferent and time ticked pleasantly into her ear; where she felt that Boston's letter, which she carried in her bag, was the letter of a mere mortal; from whence she looked as through an immense telescope at a girl crying herself to sleep on a low divan. She looked at her big buff-coloured gloves and the fringe of fine lace to her sleeves; she thought of her reflection in the long mirror that morning. It was as though she had put on the garments

of invisibility ; she wanted to make trial of them. She had a moment of power and she must use it.

She wandered after Miss Considine in a vivid material dream into the perfumers' in Jermyn Street. While they sprayed the air for her she sat like a remote princess in a ceremonial, completely forgetting that she was there to choose between the scents, feeling dimly that the one which was hers would cling to her by an obedient attraction of its own. She was a little goddess, and Miss Considine was her priestess ; she watched her lips move in a gentle incantation.

" I think the last but one. . . . "

" Yes," said Felicia, and led the way into the sun again, into the car.

" Have you anything to do, Lissy ? "

How could she have anything to do ? She was queen in her own kingdom now.

" Shall we go into the country somewhere and have lunch ? "

" I should like that. "

" But where ? "

Felicia saw the driver's head turned back towards them, saw her own distant reflection in the narrow mirror, felt Miss Considine watching her curiously. Ah, yes, where ?

"I know," said Felicia. "We'll go to St. Albans. There's . . . a cathedral there."

Miss Considine gave the order. Felicia felt that the true enchantment had begun. Things had begun to fall into their places with obedient simplicity. She had but to appear now and all this tangle would resolve itself into perfect harmony.

The streets flowed past her, swiftly and more swiftly, bearing all difficulties away on their stream. Miss Considine's hand reached to hers and pressed it gently.

"I get more enjoyment out of being with you than anything else I know."

It seemed to Felicia perfectly natural that she should ; she breathed in the acknowledgement like the air. The car crooned up the long hill to Finchley. Felicia took out Boston's letter.

"Read that, Jimmy."

She felt no whisper of curiosity to know what Miss Considine thought of it. She was a queen rewarding a devoted serving-woman with a gesture of intimacy. She hardly listened to the comment.

"What a wonderful life you do have!"
Of course.

"I've never had a letter like that in my life."

Of course.

"You might be a little more sympathetic." Felicia thought for a moment.

"But, Jimmy," she said, "it isn't a *pleasure* to get a letter like that."

"Really?" said Miss Considine, incredulously.

"It's very worrying." Felicia puckered her forehead, and wanted to laugh. "Very worrying," she repeated, and felt as though too many people were wanting to give her a million pounds.

"I suppose it does make things rather difficult," Miss Considine admitted. "But you haven't told me who Mr. D. H. B. is?"

"B. stands for Boston."

"Boston . . . Boston . . . Surely I've . . ."

"I don't think so," Felicia said, smiling, "this time."

"What are you going to do about it?"

Felicia did not answer; she saw the drowned Boston lying far away and lonely in the field.

"But you must do something."

"If I began to think that, I should be very much worried indeed," said Felicia.

"But it's not fair to leave him in that condition."

"Oh! Think of the condition he might have left me in."

Nevertheless Felicia descended a little from her serene cloudland. It was so hard to know whether she was doing anything unfair, when everything she did seemed easy and sovereign. Perhaps there was something cruel in visiting Boston with Miss Considine. He would not expect her at all; she would drop out of the sky. But perhaps, if she did drop, there was an obligation to drop unattended and alone.

She was tempted to draw back. But the very swiftness bore her on. The sense that she could command something to happen within half an hour was intoxicating. It was folly to throw such power away. Besides, the nearer they came to the inn, the more eager was the attraction that drew her there. She could not draw back now.

"Aren't you perhaps rather cruel sometimes?" said Miss Considine.

"I often wonder. I don't think so." Felicia was not as calm as an ice-queen should be.

"You're just going to leave this letter, like that, without even a reply? I couldn't do that."

“ But why not ? ”

“ I should feel that he was suffering.”

“ We all suffer, surely.”

Strangely, the moment she had said it Felicia doubted whether Miss Considine suffered at all.

Her saying that she could not leave a letter like Boston's without replying somehow chilled Felicia ; it seemed to set a vast distance between them. Felicia insisted to herself that she could ; it might be hard, but still she could. If she were to give up the claim that she could, she would surrender a precious thing.

They were passing through Barnet ; they were coming near. “ Tell him to drive to the Wheatsheaf Inn, Caulfield, Jimmy.”

Miss Considine obeyed, no longer like a priestess. It was the obedience of a servant to a queen. Felicia had never thought that she was born to command Miss Considine before ; now she did.

And yet, she herself was obeying. She was not merely replying, she was bringing herself. But there was, she insisted, a difference, a deep difference. Still, Miss Considine must not be left to find out for herself.

“ We're going to the inn where Mr. Boston

is staying," she said quietly. Miss Considine gave her a surprised look of complete and unfeigned admiration; she had never been so awake before. She relapsed into the protection of her silent smile, but she knew that their positions were subtly changed; she had become dependent.

As the car purred along the road from Barnet, Felicia descended slowly from her remoteness. She did not know what she was going to do, or what she would find. She was not calm, but she felt she had become the mistress of herself. The coming here was an act completely her own, even though it had been begun in another world. She was going to take decisions, not be dragged into them. She was glad to have Miss Considine with her as a symbol of her own power.

"What are you going to do?" Miss Considine's voice was timid, apprehensive even.

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"You're a very disturbing creature, you know, Lissy."

"Do you still think I'm cruel?"

Miss Considine did not reply.

"If it's cruel not to answer his letter,

coming to see him is surely the height of kindness, isn't it?" Felicia insisted.

"No—o. It doesn't work out like that. What you're doing is the extreme of cruelty."

"You don't believe that."

"But why do you do it?"

"Oh, how can I say?" said Felicia, almost impatiently. "This is the place, Jimmy."

"What delightful places you seem to know!" murmured Miss Considine, and she began to follow Felicia to the door.

CHAPTER XII

RESURRECTION

“Reason in itself confounded
Saw division grow together.”

—*The Phoenix and the Turtle.*

FROM his place by the dining-room window Boston saw a motor-car arrive. He waited to see whether it had stopped only to ask the way. When he saw the driver descend to open the door, he went over to Bettington. To face strangers in that little dining-room was impossible.

“We must get into the kitchen. Quickly. There’s a car with some people.” Bettington followed him out of the room. As they passed the passage they heard a hand on the door-handle. “Just in time,” said Boston.

They ran into Mrs. Williams, hurriedly tying a clean apron.

“So that’s who it was,” she said, beaming at Bettington. “I thought you’d had a ghost

to breakfast, Mr. Boston." Bettington shook hands.

"May we feed with you in the kitchen?" Boston went on through the flagged corridor without waiting for a reply. The murmur of voices came from the hall. As he shut the kitchen door he heard Mrs. Williams's voice rise in amazement.

"I didn't know she had such expensive *habitués*," he said, walking to the kitchen window. "That's an expensive car. Thank God, we've escaped."

"I couldn't have stood it," said Bettington.

They sat down in the wooden chairs. Boston went to the loaf on the dresser and cut himself a piece of bread.

"Have a piece, Bett?"

"Please." Boston cut for him also. "God, I am hungry."

Mrs. Williams returned and shut the door behind her.

"I'm afraid I can't let you have the kitchen to-day, gentlemen."

Boston was taken aback; Bettington listened as in a dream.

"We've some farmers coming," she explained. "But it's quite all right. I've put them in the parlour. Two ladies. If

you'll go along back to the dining-room now, I'll have you served first."

"But what have they come here *for*?" asked Boston.

"Oh, we do have the quality sometimes." She smiled suddenly, as though a pleasant thought had come to her. "I've only laid for one," she said. "If you'll just take your things along." She bustled about the dresser with her back to him. He took two plates and knives and forks from her.

"We shan't meet them in the passage?"

Mrs. Williams laughed outright. "They're as quiet as mice, poor things. They won't bite you, sir."

Boston led the way back to the dining-room. He tiptoed along the passage to the parlour door and listened.

"They *are* quiet," he whispered and went forward to the dining-room. Holding his plates in one hand he went in. He had a confused sight of a small lady in red and a large lady in gray.

"I'm sorry," he stammered, and started back. The knives and forks clattered to the floor. He shut the door, leaving a fork inside.

"They're in there," he whispered to Bettington. "Mrs. Williams said . . . She's not

playing a trick ? ” Bettington was bemused ; he stood irresolute, not answering.

The dining-room door opened. The lady in red appeared.

“ I think this is your fork, Mr. Boston ? ”

“ Good God ! ”

“ And there’s Bett, hiding behind,” she said. “ I didn’t expect to have everything. It’s like a fifth act.”

“ It *is*,” said Boston vehemently.

His tone shattered Felicia’s assurance. She had ventured boldly on solid ground to find it quicksand. She tried to regain possession.

“ Come in and be introduced. You’ve met Miss Considine before, Bett.”

“ I must go back to the kitchen first,” said Boston, and he went immediately.

“ Well, Bett. Don’t you recognize me ? ” She must keep her voice from faltering.

He stared at her as though he did not. “ I’ve never seen that dress before,” he said at length. “ It makes you unfamiliar.”

“ Don’t you like it ? ”

“ It’s the best dress you’ve ever had,” he said with sudden conviction. Then in a quick whisper, “ I’m going.”

She was frightened. “ But you can’t. Please don’t go . . . Please ! ”

"I must."

"Please don't. Just for this once, Bett."

He longed to get away, away from this centre of storms, to calm and silence again.

"But what can I do? Please let me go. If I thought I'd do you any good, I'd stay. I swear I would, gladly. But I know I shan't. I know it."

"But you *will*. I implore you. . . . For the last time, Bett dear!"

"Very well, I'll stay. But it's a mistake; it's a mistake."

"It's not a mistake. I know what you mean. But it's not a mistake."

He followed her into the room and shook hands with Miss Considine. Her also he could scarcely recognize. She was a clear and definite object before him, but she was quite vague as a human being. He seemed to be looking clean through the flimsy substance of her humanity. All his senses were gathered to one side of him, the side where Felicia was standing and where Boston would enter.

"Have you decided to take up psycho-analysis?" he said to Miss Considine.

"I postponed all decisions. I came back to see Felicia instead."

"That was very wise."

Miss Considine broke into a nervous laugh. "Please forgive me," she said. "But you are so very solemn."

"Am I?" he said automatically. Why had Felicia implored him to stay? Why? Why?

"Is it true," asked Miss Considine again, with the same unexpected, incongruous, high-pitched laugh, "that she's never rumped your hair?"

He turned round to Felicia. She was still standing at the side of the table near the door, gravely watching them, with a hand on her pink parasol as though it were a walking-stick.

"I haven't ever, have I, Bett? And now I've lost my chance, my last chance." She too was asking herself why she wanted him to stay, and making up answers that did not deceive herself.

"I've a good mind to take her chance, myself," said Miss Considine.

Where was Boston? Why did he not come? Yet Bettington was afraid to speak of it. "Do you really want to see my hair rumped?" he said to Miss Considine. He felt like a clown gagging a sickening interval, while the leading actor is hunted for.

"Awfully," she said, laughing nervously again.

"Well, there you are!" He ran his fingers deliberately through his shock of coarse dark hair. He would have stood on his head with the same indifference.

"I told you so," cried Miss Considine. "He is a wonderful golliwog, Lissy."

He turned round again to Felicia and displayed himself, like a senseless thing of wood.

"I can't *bear* it, Bett." She stepped across quickly and brushed his hair back to its place with her hand.

Boston came in at last. "I had to wash," he explained, intensely calm. He was introduced to Miss Considine.

"You're surprised to see Felicia?" she said.

"Not really. If she hadn't come to see me, I should have had to go and see her."

It seemed terribly naked. Bettington could not look at Felicia; he could not lift his eyes from Miss Considine's large, ringed hand. When Boston turned to Felicia and said, "That's so, isn't it?" he tingled with apprehension.

"You know these things better than I do," she said quietly.

"Do I?" he said, still looking at her gravely. "Perhaps I do."

Felicia felt that he had the right to punish her for bringing Miss Considine; he was entitled to be hurt and angry. Yet, if he used his right, it would be a crime against her. Above all this she was determined to regain possession of her ground.

"I should have thought, myself," she said quietly, "that Jimmy's new motor-car was entirely responsible."

Boston's pale cheeks flushed a little. "I don't think it can be so, really," he said patiently.

Once more Bettington felt that he must gag the silence.

"I'm certain," he said, "that my old bicycle wasn't responsible for me."

"Why did you come, Bett?" asked Felicia.

"To see him." He pointed to Boston.

"Since the new car has behaved so nicely," said Miss Considine, "the least we can do is to go for a drive after lunch . . . if there is going to be lunch."

"No, Jimmy," said Felicia. "I've had enough luxury for a little while. We're going for a walk after lunch."

Miss Considine lifted her lids to glance at

Bettington ; he became a thing of wood for the encounter.

Mrs. Williams entered with a heaped-up tray, and arranged the food on the table. "Don't let it get cold, my dears," she said, smiling at the memory of her trick. "Excuse me calling you my dear," she said, with a glance of almost awe at Felicia. "I've got the habit."

"You're one of the few people who do," said Felicia.

They sat down to lunch, as though they had run into harbour out of the precarious menace of a storm ; as though each of them had the same thought, that hunger was a great leveller. It was incongruous, impossible to be apprehensive and agitated in front of a heaped dish of new potatoes which they longed to eat. A big brown apple tart sat there like Falstaff, richly whispering, "Mortal men !"

And Felicia suddenly felt gay again. A little bubble danced up from beneath her heart, swelling and rising, and then another and another. Life was irresistible, and she was being carried, in the spray and the sunlight, on the crest of the topmost wave. And her friends there were all dear to her, and because they were dear to her, they had no right to

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be sad. It was marvellous, unaccountable, miraculous. Here they three were again in this room ! And four days ago each one of them would have vowed it impossible. What but life could do a thing like that ? And there were years and years of life, miles upon miles of the mysterious, magical, glancing pattern to unroll before them still before they went to sleep. " Be happy, be happy ! " she burned to say to them all ; she wanted to cry out. They could never be lonely any more. Had they not ridden this wave together, looked at this same wonder with their separate eyes ? Oh, the past was the past, and it was nothing more ; and the future was illimitable, why look for its end ? The present, the present ! They would miss it, they would miss it !

She poised her knife over the apple tart and laughed softly. " Don't let it get cold, my *dears*," she said, and laughed softly again. " There's the whole wisdom of this world, and not one of you even listened. Don't let it get cold, my *dears*. Don't you believe me ? " She looked at Boston with glistening eyes. He looked at her, and a bright light kindled in his own.

" I do," he said.

"And you, Jimmy?" She felt and looked as though she could not cut the apple tart if anyone denied her.

"You darling," said Miss Considine, and at the touch of her own words something hard and bitter and resentful melted in her heart and dissolved away.

"And you, Bett?"

"Under which king, Bezonian, speak or die?" said Boston. He saw Felicia's hand in the air, gripping the knife. He would never, never forget it.

Bettington pushed his chair aside, stood up and raised his tankard of beer.

"To your two Majesties!" he said. "Long life to them!"

"Don't be silly, Bett," said Felicia, and plunged her knife into the pie. She felt she was colouring absurdly.

"Felicia," said Bettington softly. "I wasn't clowning then, really not."

She coloured still more, then stretched out her hand to him. "I know you weren't," she whispered, and pressed his hand with all her might. Those clumsy finger-bones, how well she knew them! A pang shot through her heart, an extreme of intermingled pain and joy. She would be crying next.

He raised her hand in his own and kissed it. "My loyalty," he said, so that Boston could hear.

Boston heard it; it echoed through the chambers of his heart. It seemed to him that something bigger and finer than Bettington even had spoken; that he had never heard such a word spoken before, a word that unlocked the door on to a happiness he had not dreamed and surely had not deserved. And he felt that he would have given that happiness for the privilege of having spoken the word that created it.

As they rose to leave the room, Felicia caught Bettington by the sleeve. It was an old, old gesture of hers, to compel him to look at a thing that delighted her.

"You know why I wanted you to stay, now?" she said.

He looked at her in amazement. "You *saw* this was coming?" he said incredulously.

She shook her head, smiling. "No, no! But I knew it depended on you," she said.

It was his turn to smile and shake his head. "Besides, I hadn't the faintest notion that I should do such a thing—or could," he added.

"That's what I mean, Bett. When I saw

you here, I knew everything depended on you, not on us."

They began their walk. Felicia took Boston, and herself led the way along the path to the village.

"So you are going to marry me," said Boston.

"There's no escape now," she said.

"It's queer how inevitable it was."

"Was it?"

"Didn't you feel it was?"

"Inevitable? No . . . do I have to feel that?"

"You don't have to do anything. I only wondered."

"I said that I felt that there was no escape now." She laughed. "But I think the reason why I came here was to make sure that I didn't want to marry you."

"I'm not the man who wrote you the letter," he said shyly.

"I knew that. I think I am the woman who received it."

"I felt so determined; I had so much to explain; and now I feel positively frightened, tongue-tied."

"Yes," she said, and she, too, felt infinitely

shy. She thought suddenly that this man beside her was the strange man who had stood aloof in his mackintosh in the darkness of the arch, so long ago, and had offered his umbrella with his abrupt gesture. Now he was beside her again, all-important to her ; yet it seemed he was still the same figure shrouded in half-darkness.

She took his hand.

"It is frightening, isn't it?" he said. "Do you have this feeling of having utterly lost yourself, and of being sure of yourself at the same time?"

For answer she pressed his hand. Her gaiety had become grave and solemn ; it had folded its leaves into the compass of a tight, sleeping bud. She did not want to speak.

Boston looked at her, and she looked gravely at him. Her eyes, filled with a trembling poise, her lips, barely touched by the breath of distant laughter, seemed to remind him of some one he had known long ago, in a life far simpler than this of ours ; they greeted and acknowledged him. He too smiled involuntarily, and he felt there was an unaccountable sadness in his smile ; but when he tried to say something, his heart was

lifted up on a wave of unaccountable happiness.

"You're extraordinarily lovely, you know, Felicia," he said.

"Am I?" she answered. "I'm glad."

"We must imagine ourselves a couple of bridesmaids," said Miss Considine. "Otherwise we shall feel out of place."

Bettington tried to smile. The joke made him wince. "We must wait for our time to form in the procession, then," he said. He stood outside the door of the inn, unconsciously beating time with his foot, while he watched Boston and Felicia pass slowly out of sight along the road.

"We shall lose them altogether," said Miss Considine impatiently.

"No. I know the way. I've been here before." He followed them in the distance with his eyes. "That's all right," he said, turning back to her. "They've taken the path to the village." They set out.

"I'm beginning to feel awfully tired," he said. "I got up at half-past five this morning."

"And you bicycled all the way?"

"Pure enthusiasm," he laughed.

"Is Mr. Boston a great friend of yours?"

" I think so."

" Surely you know ? "

" Well, then, yes, he is."

" You've known Felicia a long time ?"

" Yes, in my own way, a long time."

" I wonder how it is we've never met before last night ? "

" I know hardly any of her friends."

" Perhaps she thought we wouldn't get on well."

" Perhaps," said Bettington. " I don't suppose we belong to the same worlds, you know."

" Psycho-analysis and *Clarté* ! "

" I don't belong to that world at all, if it is a world," he said patiently. " I didn't mean we belonged to different sets."

" Then what did you mean ? " she asked implacably.

" One makes one's friends of the people who think the same things important."

" Do you have to sign a paper ? It sounds very rigorous."

" You have to be."

" Don't you think it's very snobbish and exclusive ? "

" It may sound so, as I say it ; but it isn't really. You have to exclude things in order to live—just as you have to stick to others."

"But we aren't talking of things; we're talking of people."

"It's all the same. People are either with you or against you. You keep with them long enough to know which they are, and then you either sheer off or grapple them."

"But surely people count for something in themselves—their personalities?"

"I'm not ruling out personalities. You could put all I'm saying in another way. You keep with people long enough to know what their personalities are, whether they appeal to your strength or weakness; then, if you're strong enough, you decide."

"I see. . . . It sounds very ruthless. Even so, that's all the more reason why we should have met. I ought at least to have been sent up on approval. But why do you have to make life so serious?"

"Explanations are always more serious than what you explain, jokes especially."

"I hope this doesn't mean," said Miss Considine, "that you've decided against Felicia's personality. This isn't the reason why you aren't going to marry her?"

"I never was going to."

"Oh . . . she told me you had decided not to. That's hardly the same thing, is it?"

"She really told you that?"

"Yes."

"She didn't tell you that she was ever in love with me?"

"I understood——"

"I'm not asking you what you understood. I'm asking what she told you."

"No," said Miss Considine faintly, after a pause. "She didn't say she was ever in love with you."

"That's better," said Bettington.

"You don't like the idea of women falling in love with you. I quite understand, on your principles. It must be very troublesome."

"That's it," he said, and laughed. "They're turning back."

"We'd better wait for them, I think. It will look so absurd if we march off at the same distance."

"Yes, we'll wait." He spent a long, dreary minute, leaning against the gate, wondering what he should say to them when they came. It must be something wonderful, superlative; but nothing he could think of seemed either.